THE BĪJAK OF KABIR

LINDA HESS
SUKHDEV SINGH

SHOUT
SHARE
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Translated by
LINDA HESS AND SHUKDEV SINGH
Essays and Notes by
LINDA HESS

MOTILAL BANARSIDASS PUBLISHERS
PRIVATE LIMITED • DELHI

First Indian Edition: Delhi, 1986
Reprint Edition: Delhi, 2001

First Edition: USA, 1983

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ISBN: 81-208-0216-0

Also available at:
MOTILAL BANARSIDASS
41 U.A. Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110 007
8 Mahalaxmi Chamber, Warden Road, Mumbai 400 026
120 Royapettah High Road, Mylapore, Chennai 600 004
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Sanas Plaza, 1302 Baji Rao Road, Pune 411 002
8 Camac Street, Kolkata 700 017
Ashok Rajpath, Patna 800 004
Chowk, Varanasi 221 001

Printed in India
BY JAINENDRA PRAKASH JAIN AT SHRI JAINENDRA PRESS,
A-45 NARAINA, PHASE-I, NEW DELHI 110 028 AND
PUBLISHED BY NARENDRA PRAKASH JAIN FOR
MOTILAL BANARSIDASS PUBLISHERS PRIVATE LIMITED,
BUNGALOW ROAD, DELHI 110 007

To Frances Peavey
who does not abandon beings

Acknowledgments

Many owners share this body, says Kabir. And many collaborators share credit for the appearance of this book. First to acknowledge is my cotranslator, Shukdev Singh, who guided me inch by inch through the tangle and obscurity of Kabir's medieval Hindi. Then the leaders and monks of Kabir Chaura Temple in Varanasi, especially Mahant Amrit Das, administrative head Ganga Sharan Das Shastri, and Sant Vivek Das. They published an early selection of translations, helped interpret many passages, and chanted Kabir's works. Dr. Yugeshvar of Kashi Vidyapith and Dada Sitaram gave valuable commentaries on poems. Dr. Hazariprasad Dvivedi shared his vast knowledge of Kabir and the tradition. Thakur Jaydev Singh shed light on upside-down language. Dr. Veer Bhadra Mishra gave friendship and assistance more than can be measured.

Support from the American Institute of Indian Studies enabled me to work in India. Karine Schomer and Michael Nagler of Berkeley guided me carefully through various stages of work. Charlotte Vaudeville was most generous in her interest and hospitality. Elaine Pagels, Gail Sher, and Mary Watson gave excellent comments on the manuscript. Jack Hawley has been in the first rank of encouragers. Carolyn and Martin Karcher have supported me in innumerable and indescribable ways. Karl Ray has been a shaping presence, visible and invisible, from beginning to end.

Bonnie Crown saw the book through long stages of revision and found a superb publisher. Jack Shoemaker, Tom Christensen, and the North Point staff have warmed my heart, caught my mistakes, and adhered impressively to schedule.

Frances Peavey transformed me so that the book could come out. Kazuaki Tanahashi's caring has entered every particle of this work, "as water enters water." Zentatsu Baker-roshi of San Francisco Zen Center made me feel for the first time that openheartedness (Kabir's "honesty") was possible; he and Reb Anderson continue to open my ears to Kabir and others.

Special thanks to my parents, Rudy and Jerry Hess, who gave me the precious jewel of a human birth. Also to George and Marlo Gross; he was my first great teacher, both are my lifelong friends.

Back in India, thanks to the villagers of Chittupur, who sang upside-down songs with such enthusiasm. Thanks to Gayabanandji, who vanished.

Table of Contents

PREFACE xi

TRANSLITERATION AND ABBREVIATIONS xv

INTRODUCTION
- I. *Kabir's Life and Work* 3
- II. *Rough Rhetoric* 7
- III. *The Untellable Story* 25
- IV. *"Numskull, You've Missed the Point!"* 35

TRANSLATIONS
- I. *Śabda* 41
- II. *Ramainī* 79
- III. *Sākhī* 90

APPENDICES
- A. *Upside-down Language* 135
  - 1. The Tradition 135
  - 2. The Cow is Sucking at the Calf's Teat: Interpreting Kabir's Upside-down Songs 145
- B. *A Note on Meter and Rhyme* 162
- C. *Versions and Editions of the* Bījak *and Errors in the Hindi Edition* 165

NOTES 169

GLOSSARY 197

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY 199

Preface

Kabir's poems have been sung and recited throughout North India—by learned pandits and illiterate villagers, by wandering ascetics and classical musicians—for 500 years. He is famed for his rough and powerful voice, his uncompromising challenge to individuals to shake off their delusions, their stiff orthodoxies and pretentious pieties, and to find out the truth for themselves. Several religious sects have made important collections of his works. The *Bījak*, translated here, is the sacred book of the Kabir Panth, or sect devoted to Kabir.

No one knows exactly when the Kabir Panth was formed. One scholar has estimated that it originated in northeastern India between 1600 and 1650 (a century or two after the death of Kabir), but this is based on rather rough guesswork.[1] Today the Panth is a large and distinctly organized body, with many branches and a number of subsects under different leadership, some bearing friendly relations to each other, some tending to be rivals. With one major exception, all treat the *Bījak* as their most sacred scripture.[2]

Because of the visibility of the Panth, the Kabir collection best known to westerners in the early twentieth century was the *Bījak*. Some also knew of Kabir through the *Guru Granth*, sacred book of the Sikhs, which contains several hundred songs and couplets attributed to Kabir.[3] In the 1920s Professor Shyamsundar Das, head of the Hindi Department at Banaras Hindu University, discovered two manuscripts which he claimed had been written in the very lifetime of Kabir: one bore a date equivalent to A.D. 1504. These writings had been compiled by another sect, the Dadu Panth, in what is now the state of Rajasthan. Das published the collection, under the title *Kabīr Granthāvalī*, in 1928.[4] His influence was such that the *Granthāvalī* soon became the standard collection of Kabir, especially in the universities. Although the 1504 colophon was eventually proved false, the *Granthāvalī* is still the most widely used text in academic circles.

After the *Granthāvalī*'s publication, the *Bījak* fell into neglect and even disrepute. Some scholars claimed that it was marred by sectarian bias or that it was not very old. It had appeared only in uncritical editions by Kabir Panthis, with several confusing recensions and countless variations. The first attempt at a critical edition was prepared by Shukdev Singh of Banaras Hindu University and published in 1972.[5]

In 1976 Dr. Singh and I began collaborating on the present translation, based on his edition. For eighteen months we studied the text word by word, puzzled over many difficulties, and prepared the first draft of the translations. After returning to the United States I added information gleaned from dictionaries and commentaries, put the translations into final form, and prepared the introduction and notes.

In studying the *Bījak* I have come to believe that its neglect by modern scholars has been undeserved, and that this nearly independent "eastern tradition" (as Charlotte Vaudeville has designated it) is as important in evaluating the personality and poetry of Kabir as the "western tradition" represented by the Rajasthani and Sikh collections.[6] Vaudeville's extensive translations, published in French and English over the last twenty-five years, have strongly emphasized the western tradition.[7] Ahmad Shah's 1917 translation of the *Bījak* is stiff and far from the original style of Kabir, and lacks notes on dubious points of translation.[8] Dr. Singh and I eventually decided that a selection of about half the text of the *Bījak* with introduction and notes would be appropriate for a broad group of readers in the West, including both specialists and nonspecialists. I have tried to select those poems which are most powerful and to avoid those which are purely repetitious or which, even after years of study, remain stubbornly opaque.

Kabir's original audience was composed entirely of listeners. His present audience is composed largely of readers. I have used "reader" and "listener" interchangeably in talking of audience response; and I have freely alternated "song," "poem," and *pada* in referring to Kabir's compositions. Although a large section of the introduction is devoted to the experience created by Kabir's verses, I am aware that the literary bias of both myself and my readers attenuates the impact and inevitably distorts our understanding.

Of the many terms Kabir uses to address his audience, the most common is *sant*, which may mean ascetic, renunciant, saint, or simply religious person. The Sanskrit root *sat* means "truth," so an appropriate rendering of *sant* could be "seeker of truth." I have translated the word as "seeker" or "saint," depending on which fits better into the rhythm of the translation. Kabir creates a sense of pervasive irony by constantly addressing us as *sant*s, implying that we are devoted to or already in possession of the truth, even while assailing us for our myriad deceptions and delusions.

All versions of the *Bījak* include three main sections called *Ramainī*, *Śabda*, and *Sākhī*, plus a fourth section containing a number of miscellaneous folk-song forms.[9] Most of the Kabir material has been popularized through the song-form known as *śabda* or *pada*, and

through the aphoristic *sākhī* that serves throughout North India as a vehicle for popular wisdom. These two forms, universally linked with Kabir, have been emphasized in our translation. We have also included a group of *ramainī*s, which appear both in the *Bījak* and in the Rajasthani tradition. The miscellaneous folk forms appear in none of the major collections except the *Bījak* and have not been included in this selection.[10]

Readers interested in more detailed information on textual matters and questions of authenticity may consult my "Searching for Kabir: The Textual Tradition";[11] my "Three Kabir Collections: A Comparative Study";[12] Charlotte Vaudeville's *Kabīr*;[13] and several Hindi critics.[14]

Transliteration and Abbreviations

The standard transliteration of *devanāgarī* script is used for all italicized words and titles.

Proper names have no diacritical marks and are sometimes given in anglicized forms (Krishna, Singh). To make spelling accord more closely with pronunciation, *c* and *ch* of standard Hindi transliteration are rendered by *ch* and *chh* in proper names; similarly, both *ś* and *ṣ* are rendered by *sh* (Shiva, Vishnu). Words that have come into use in English are not italicized or given diacritical marks (for example, yogi, guru, mantra, karma, chakra, Brahmin).

Final *a*, required in transliteration of Sanskrit and of medieval Hindi poetry, is usually included. It is always used after a double consonant (śabda) but sometimes omitted within a word to reflect modern Hindi pronunciation.

Nasalization of vowels is indicated by a tilde (jahā̃).

In the notes, when two forms of a Hindi word are separated by a slash, the first is the form as found in the *Bījak*, and the second is the modern Hindi form.

Kabir's verse forms—*śabda*, *ramainī*, and *sākhī*—are abbreviated to ś., r., and sā., with an *s* added for pluralization (śs., rs., sās.).

The following abbreviations are used:

BI: *Bījak*.

SS: Shukdev Singh.

VD: Vichardas commentary on the *Bījak*.

Rewa: Raja of Rewa commentary on the *Bījak*.

Manak: *Mānak hindi koś*.

Śabdasāgar: *Saṅkśipt hindī śabdasāgar*.

The Bījak of Kabir

Introduction

I. KABIR'S LIFE AND WORK

There are volumes of legendary biography about Kabir, but the widely accepted "facts" about his life can be summarized in a few sentences. He was born in Varanasi around the beginning of the fifteenth century in a class of weavers recently converted to Islam. He learned the family craft (later composing a number of poems with weaving metaphors), probably studied meditative and devotional practices with a Hindu guru, and developed into a powerful teacher and poet, unique in his autonomy, intensity, and abrasiveness. His verses were composed orally and collected by disciples and admirers after varying periods of circulation. He is generally assumed to have been illiterate, and no critic fails to quote the famous verse:

> I don't touch ink or paper,
> this hand never grasped a pen.
> The greatness of four ages
> Kabir tells with his mouth alone. (*sā. 187*)

Though of course we cannot prove his illiteracy or his innocence of contact with ink or paper, the notion that he insisted on oral transmission accords well with the gist of his teaching. Of all the terms he used to refer to the enlightenment experience or the means of reaching it, the most prominent is *śabda*, the Word, along with *nāma*, the name, and *rāma*, Ram. He stresses direct contact with the teacher, indicating that the only authentic teaching is the word from the guru's mouth (sā. 82). And he continually urges immediate understanding, a recognition which (like the apprehension of a vibrating word) is *sahaja*, spontaneous, simple.

In India, Kabir is almost universally believed (though on shaky historical evidence) to have been a disciple of the famous guru Ramananda.[1] Perhaps the most popular legend about Kabir relates how he tricked the orthodox Hindu into accepting him, a Muslim, as a student. Supposedly he stretched himself across the stairs leading to the river where Ramananda came for his bath in the predawn darkness. Tripping over Kabir's body and fearing sudden danger to his life, Ramananda cried out—as Kabir knew he would—his own mantra: "Ram! Ram!" Kabir then claimed that the mantra had been transmitted and he must be accepted as a disciple. Whether or not the two men were related in this way, Kabir's poetry is full of exhortations to recite

the name of Ram, to devote oneself to Ram, to drop everything except Ram.

It should be emphasized that this Ram is not the deity of popular Hindu mythology, incarnation of Vishnu and hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic. In a number of poems Kabir explicitly repudiates this anthropomorphic Ram. Though he sometimes addresses King Ram, Lord, or Hari (a name of Vishnu) in the songs, many references to Ram and the Word indicate that his Ram is primarily a sound, a mantra consisting of the long and short syllables *Rā-ma*. We may surmise that he used this mantra, was perhaps taught it (as popular tradition asserts) by his guru.[2] Whether or not Kabir's own practice was the repetition of "Ram," we know that he recommended it to others as a way of achieving the utter concentration necessary to penetrate the many layers of distraction and delusion, to reach the threshold of a fundamental question: is it two or one? something or nothing? can you find the tracks of a bird in the air? of a fish in the sea?[3]

While there is evidence that both Hindus and Muslims were ready to assault Kabir physically during his lifetime, they have since his death been ready to assault each other over the privilege of claiming him as their own.[4] A famous legend about Kabir shows his Hindu and Muslim followers massed for combat after his death, each side demanding to take charge of the body. But before the first blow is struck, someone removes the shroud to discover that a heap of flowers has replaced the cadaver. The two religious groups divide the flowers, and each goes off to bury or burn its half according to prescribed rituals.

The story illustrates the element of absurdity or futility that underlies the career of a great and courageous figure who passes from public contempt to adulation. Kabir was well aware of this element in his attempt to teach what he knew; his awareness is reflected in an irony that flickers throughout his verses, making him unique among the devotional poets of the period. He knew that people would inevitably misunderstand what he was saying, that they didn't want to hear it, that they would twist him into the image of the very gurus he excoriated, and that, after he had spent his life debunking ritual and slavish outward observance, his own devotees would be ready to shed each other's blood over the question of whether his carcass should be buried or burned, to the intonation of syllables in Arabic or Sanskrit.

> Saints, I see the world is mad.
> If I tell the truth they rush to beat me,
> if I lie they trust me. (*ś. 4*)

Another often heard story is that the infant Kabir was placed in a basket and set afloat on a pond by a Brahmin widow (who, it is some-

times added, conceived him immaculately and bore him through the palm of her hand), there to be discovered and adopted by a Muslim couple. This story seems obviously concocted by Hindus unwilling to concede the saint's Muslim origins. In fact his birth and upbringing in a household of Muslim weavers in Varanasi may be the only data we can take for granted about Kabir. Current scholarship favors 1398–1448 as the dates of his birth and death.[5]

But to be a Muslim in North India in the fifteenth century often meant to be still half a Hindu. For several centuries the Muslim invaders had been waging warfare up and down the subcontinent, taking over kingdoms and propagating their faith through the point of the sword. Large groups of local people—usually low-caste Hindus, often laborers and craftspeople—found it convenient to convert en masse to the religion of the conquerors. This did not mean that they forsook their former gods and practices. Old Brahmanic Hinduism, Hindu and Buddhist tantrism, the individualist tantric teaching of the Nath yogis, and the personal devotionalism coming up from the South mingled with the austere intimations of imageless godhead promulgated by Islam. Every one of these influences is evident in Kabir, who more than any other poet-saint of the period reflects the unruly, rich conglomerate of religious life that flourished around him.

Some modern commentators have tried to present Kabir as a synthesizer of Hinduism and Islam; but the picture is a false one.[6] While drawing on various traditions as he saw fit, Kabir emphatically declared his independence from both the major religions of his countrymen, vigorously attacked the follies of both, and tried to kindle the fire of a similar autonomy and courage in those who claimed to be his disciples. In a famous couplet he declares:

> I've burned my own house down,
> the torch is in my hand.
> Now I'll burn down the house of anyone
> who wants to follow me.[7]

If Kabir insisted on anything, it was on the penetration of everything inessential, every layer of dishonesty and delusion. The individual must find the truth in his own body and mind, so simple, so direct, that the line between "him" and "it" disappears. One of the formulaic phrases in Kabir's verses is *ghaṭa ghaṭa mẽ*, in every body, in every vessel. The truth is close—closer than close. Kabir understood the countless ploys by which we avoid recognizing ourselves. One form our foolish cleverness takes is our desperate, seemingly sincere searching outside ourselves. We try to find other people who have the secret, and then we try to understand *them*. So we have tried to do with Kabir. But he persistently evades our attempts to define or explain him. Was he a

Hindu? A Muslim? Were his ancestors Buddhists? Did he practice yoga? Did he have a guru? Who was it? The impossibility of ascertaining these basic facts about Kabir's religious life is part of his legacy of teaching.

The chief source for our understanding of Kabir is, of course, his poetry. But the many volumes published under his name and the innumerable songs sung with his signature line can hardly be assumed to be authentic. If we are interested in discovering who Kabir really was and what his most characteristic utterances were, it is important to have a sense of how the verses were originally presented and how they attained popularity and fame, eventually to be canonized in various sectarian scriptures.

Religious "literature" in medieval India was sung. It spread across the country like wildfire on the lips of devotees and wandering ascetics who walked from region to region or met in conventions of "holy men" on the banks of some sacred river, where a chief activity was *bhajan*, or devotional singing. This oral tradition is still flourishing today, so that one can move among sadhus (monks and ascetics) or groups of singers in villages and transcribe songs by Kabir—at least versions of songs that have been passed over the centuries, across mountains and deserts, through dialectal alterations, and sometimes in and out of printed versions as well. The best-known translations in the West—Tagore's English renditions of one hundred songs, published in 1915, and Robert Bly's new versions adapted from Tagore—are based on verses originally brought together by a Bengali collector who transcribed them from the lips of wandering holy men in the early 1900s.[8]

There are also written collections that have been preserved in roughly the same form over several centuries. The efforts of compiling these collections were made by sects that had some particular interest in the saint-poet whose sayings they set down. In Kabir's case there are three major collections, put together by sects in three widely separated regions of North India: the modern states of Panjab in the West, Rajasthan in the Midwest, and Uttar Pradesh/Bihar in the East. The oldest is the *Guru Granth* (or *Ādī Granth*), sacred book of the Sikhs, which has been in its present form since about 1603.[9] The *Granth*, compiled in Panjab, contains utterances of the early Sikh gurus and of other saint-poets whom they admired. The Rajasthani collection, called the *Pañcvāṇī* ("Words of the Five") includes sayings of five saints exalted by the Dadu Panth.[10] The *Bījak* is the scripture of the Kabir Panth and contains only works attributed to Kabir. The dates of origin of the *Pañcvāṇī* and the *Bījak* are uncertain; but both can be

assumed to have taken shape in the seventeenth century, rather later than the *Guru Granth*.[11]

The three collections have much in common, but show somewhat different characters. In all traditions—eastern and western, oral and written—Kabir is known for his toughness and iconoclasm. But in the western-based *Guru Granth* and *Pañcvāṇī* there also appears a softer, more emotional Kabir who sings of ecstatic insight, who experiences passionate longing for and tormented separation from a beloved, or who offers himself in utter surrender, as a servant or beggar, to a personified divine master. Often the western poet's expressions are colored by the terms and forms of the Krishna *bhakti* (devotional) movement which was then dominant in those regions.[12]

The *Bījak* presents a more austere and dramatic personality, a poet of sudden flashes and jagged primary colors rather than subtle emotional hues. Above all he is the intense teacher, striving to shake his listeners out of their false security, their careless dishonesty, the naive belief that they actually possess and will continue to possess house, body, mate, and family, or that the mind—which Kabir images as a nervous thief or a dog howling at its own reflection—is an accurate reporter of what is going on in the world. This Kabir is passionate too; but his passion is to awaken. His personal drama has receded into the background, and the great truth or supreme being he urges us to understand shows almost no trace of anthropomorphism or personality.

Yet Kabir's teaching is very personal. This is because he speaks directly and aggressively to us, his listeners and readers. Almost all his poems have some term of direct address: Hey seeker! Listen, brother! Tell me, Pandit! Fool, you've missed it! His poems bristle with questions, assaults, paradoxes and enigmas. He confronts, irritates, and fascinates, always trying to set off a spark of consciousness in people who are sinking in the river of time, the ocean of delusion.

II. ROUGH RHETORIC

Many scholars have noted Kabir's odd combination of crudeness and potency. Charlotte Vaudeville observes that while Kabir is undoubtedly rude, crude, vulgar, and prosaic, he is at the same time eloquent, exciting, dazzling, and unforgettable.[13] Some Indian critics find the crudeness of Kabir and other *nirguṇa* poets a grave defect.[14] Others have tried, like royal messengers trying to cram the stepsisters' big feet into Cinderella's dainty slipper, to fit Kabir's utterances into the categories of classical Indian poetics.[15] Some have told me confidentially that Kabir was not a poet at all, but a social reformer.

Kabir was a poet, and a radical reformer, though society was only the outermost skin of what he wished to reform. What makes his

rough verses so strong and memorable? The question points to a study of style.

The problems involved in using translations to analyze the style of a medieval Indian poet for a twentieth-century Western audience are minimized in Kabir's case, for he is the most translatable of the non-modern Indian poets.[16] This is, first, because of the simplicity and bluntness of his style; and further, because of a way of looking at and speaking of things that is more modern than classical, more individual than idealized.

Leonard Nathan, a recent translator of Kalidasa's *Meghadūta*, has discussed the difficulties a Western audience may have in understanding the assumptions that underlie the Sanskrit poet's world view.[17] One such assumption is that the empirical world, being impermanent and disordered, is unreal. Art is meant to reflect not this chaos of passing forms, but the harmonious reality beyond them. The poet, using the language of permanence and perfection (classical Sanskrit), composes the elements of the empirical world into an endlessly elaborated unity in which everything reflects everything else; or more exactly, reflects and gathers itself in perfect order around the human. So Kalidasa's "cloud-messenger" turns the whole subcontinent into an image of itself:

> Mountains and rivers are invested with feeling and their beauty charged with sexual attraction; trees and flowers become their ornaments. Animals evoke human beauties. . . . Even the great rains act out the release of pent-up passions.[18]

Classical Indian art, as Nathan describes it, is a ceremony celebrating in minute detail the unity and ideality of the world beyond appearances.

There may be unity underlying Kabir's vision, but he does not take the route of the classical poet to reveal it. Unceremoniously, he shows us actual human feeling, surrounds us with the experience of delusion, makes vivid the fragmented nature of ordinary life. What unity there may be comes forth in flashes, or in leaps from the disordered surface of the world to a momentary recognition: it is here, in every body (*ghaṭa ghaṭa mẽ*); something simple (*sahaja*); a single word (*śabda*). He does not, like Kalidasa or the Hindi classicist Tulsidas, anthropomorphize flora, fauna, and the elements to reflect ideal human feeling.

The modernity that many readers have remarked on in Kabir may be better understood through a passage in which Nathan contrasts Western and Indian expectations of poetry:

> Where we look for close adherence to psychological and physical reality, the Indian poet rigorously excludes verisimilitude. Where we expect the

> poet to speak in his own voice—a voice that should be at once close to common speech and yet identifiably original—the Indian poet stays far behind his subject and strives at every turn for uncommon eloquence which yet deliberately echoes the voices of his tradition. Where we are prepared for, if not direct conflict, at least strong tension needing drastic resolution, the Indian poet gives us the slow unfolding of a foregone conclusion. Where we might hope to feel the pleasure of new insight, the Indian poet wants his audience to experience the delight of a foreknown universal sentiment.[19]

In every one of these contrasting pairs Kabir fulfills the expectation not of the Indian audience, but of the Western.

Although his *nirguṇa* God or supreme truth seems impersonal when compared with the anthropomorphic Ram and Krishna,[20] Kabir can be described as the most personal of all *bhakti* poets: not because he dwells on his private experience, exposes his own quivering heart, but because he gets very personal with us, the audience.

Stylistically this factor most clearly distinguishes Kabir from his famous colleagues Sur, Tulsi, and Mira: they are primarily addressing God; he is primarily addressing us. Even when Sur and Tulsi sing in their own person of the Lord's wondrous doings on earth, the implicit relationship in the poem is between poet and God—a relationship often made explicit in the signature line, where the devotee turns to God with a prayer or other fervent expression of feeling. It is a convention of revery, ecstasy, longing, in relationship to God. The reader or listener is present only as eavesdropper.

The reader is central in Kabir.[21] Nearly everyone in North India is familiar with the formula *kahai Kabīra suno bhāī sāhdho*—"Kabir says, listen brother sadhu!" or *suno ho santo*, "Listen oh saints!" It is Kabir's trademark. But far more than a formula, it signifies Kabir's passion to engage, to wake people up, to affect them. This power to affect through language is fundamentally what we mean when we speak of rhetoric.

Address and Assault

In his mastery of the vocative, Kabir is unique among the *bhakti* poets. Not in the *saguṇa* devotees, not in *nirguṇa* Dadu or reformer Nanak, not in the radical Bengali Buddhist poets, the iconoclast Gorakh or the surreal Bauls, whatever else they may have in common with him, do we find the intense bearing down upon the listener that is so prominent in Kabir. It shows itself first in the array of addresses he uses to seize our attention: Hey Saint, Brother, Brahmin, Yogi, Hermit, Babu, Mother, Muslim, Creature, Friend, Fool! Many poems are simply directed at "you." But titles or pronouns of address are only the begin-

ning. Kabir pounds away with questions, prods with riddles, stirs with challenges, shocks with insults, disorients with verbal feints. It seems that if one read him responsively one could hardly help getting red in the face, jumping around, squirming, searching, getting embarrassed, or shouting back.

For a taste of the style, here is a pastiche of lines from various poems:

Pandit, you've got it wrong.

Monk, stop scattering your mind.

Pandit, do some research
and let me know
how to destroy
transiency.

Now you, Mr. Qazi, what kind of work is that,
going from house to house
chopping heads?
Who told you to swing the knife?

Pandit, think
before you drink
that water!

Think! Think! Figure it out!

Saints and reverences—

Morons and mindless fools—

Enchanted madman—

Look in your heart!

You simple-minded people . . .

The vocative sabotages passivity. If someone shoots you a question, you immediately look for an answer. If someone sneaks behind your chair and whispers, "Why are you slouched over?" you will straighten your back before thinking about it. If someone calls you a lunatic you may be angered or amused, but you will certainly be interested. Addressed affectionately, you will soften and begin to trust—which may just prepare the way for a new, unexpected blow.

The vocative creates intimacy. "Where did two Gods come from?"

might be a good opening to a polemical poem. But how different the effect when Kabir says, "Brother, where did your two Gods come from? Tell me, who made you mad?" (ś. 30). The vocative draws the reader, as participant, into highly charged dialogues:

> Saints, once you wake up don't doze off. (ś. 2)

> Pandit . . .
> tell me where untouchability
> came from, since you believe in it. (ś. 41)

Sometimes an intimate address turns out to be a brazen trick: "Where are you going alone, my friend?" the poet begins softly in ś. 99. A few lines later we realize he is addressing a corpse.

The address may become so aggressive that it must be called an assault, complete with abuses that no decorum moderates:

> You go around bent! bent! bent!
> Your ten doors are full of hell, you smell
> like a fleet of scents, your cracked
> eyes don't see the heart, you haven't
> an ounce of sense.
> Drunk with anger, hunger, sex,
> you drown without water. (ś. 72)

In one shocking opener Kabir calls his listener the "son of a slut." Then he steps out from behind this attention-getter and proceeds with his poem:

> Son of a slut!
> There: I've insulted you.
> Think about getting on the good road. (ś. 102)

Kabir's provocations often take the form of questions, skillfully inserted to ruffle us up or draw us out. Questions are used in a variety of ways—in openings or conclusions, singly or in series, as bait or goad, as funnel to point our inquiry. Sometimes a single question comes like a sudden jab: "When the pot falls apart, what do you call it?" (ś. 75). The jab may be just a setup: when we rise to it, a hard slap may hit us from another direction. Sometimes questions are shot in rapid series, like blows from a boxer, left, right, left, right, left, right. When they end we may find ourselves staggering:

> Who's whose husband? Who's whose wife?
> Death's gaze spreads—untellable story.
> Who's whose father? Who's whose son?
> Who suffers? Who dies? (ś. 36)

Qazi, what book are you lecturing on?
Yak yak yak, day and night . . .
If God wanted circumcision,
why didn't you come out cut?
If circumcision makes you a Muslim,
what do you call your women? . . .
If putting on the thread makes you Brahmin,
what does the wife put on?
That Shudra's touching your food, pandit!
How can you eat it?
Hindu, Muslim—where did they come from?
Who started this road?
Look in your heart, send out scouts:
where is heaven? (*ś.* 84)

In quieter poems questions are a way of approaching an experience that is not accessible to direct statement. In certain cases questions seem to open a space at the end of a poem that is wide and silent (for example, ś. 67, discussed on p. 24 below; and r. 7).

The intimacy created by Kabir's style is not always obvious or entirely conscious, because the audience would often prefer not to identify with his addressees. As readers or listeners, we are more inclined to identify with Kabir. When he conjures up a comic pandit, we laugh. When he exposes the greedy and hypocritical, we scorn. When he reveals the incredible blindness of people who won't face death, we applaud. The use of stock characters allows us to maintain a sense of detachment. We know what a Brahmin priest looks like: he has a shaved head, paints marks on his forehead, dresses in a white pleated loincloth, counts his beads, and sits among his paraphernalia of brass trays, sandalwood paste, scriptures and bells, exacting coins from hapless pilgrims. A yogi wears a patchwork cloak and drinks out of a cup made from a skull. A merchant sits amid his wares in the bazaar and holds up his scales, two round plates suspended from strings. These are not descriptions of *us*.

But gradually something begins to gnaw at our consciousness. It occurs to us that pandits can wear other costumes besides the white *dhotī* and rosary of *tulsī* or *rudrākṣa* beads, can sit under other umbrellas than those that front the Ganga at Varanasi. It is relatively easy to notice panditry in the universities, violence in government, greed in the marketplace, phoniness in religion. Then we can spot signals closer at hand, in the gestures and voices of our neighbors. But Kabir's power is most tellingly revealed when his words reverberate in our own skulls, and we see the succession of disguises under which we live our daily lives:

Dropped from the belly at birth,
a man puts on his costumes
and goes through his acts. (*r.* 1)

Riddles and Surprises

One set of formulas in Kabir clusters around the words *acaraj*—surprise or amazing thing—and *adbhut*—wonderful, marvelous, strange. Formula or not, the promise of amazement stirs up our interest and gives Kabir a further chance to play with us:

Saints, here's a surprise for you.
A son grabbed his mother
while a crazy virgin fell for her father,
dropped her husband but went
to the in-laws.
Think of that! (*ś.* 6)

Related to the "surprise" formula is the "Who will believe it?" formula:

Who can I tell?
And who will believe it?
When the bee touches that flower,
he dies.

The opening questions are teasers, designed to make the reader volunteer, "Tell *me*. *I'll* believe it!" The sudden injection of "that flower"[22] again elicits a curious response—"what flower?"—and the poet is set up for his main exposition:

In the middle of the sky's temple
blooms a flower. . . .

The poem could easily have begun at this point. But the experience is quite different when it begins with the rhetorical questions and the dramatic introduction of flower and bee.

From surprises and incredibilities it is a short step to the pure riddle. A number of poems are framed explicitly as riddles:

Think, pandit, figure it out:
male or female? (*ś.* 44)

What will you call the Pure?
Say, creature, how will you mutter the name
of one without hand or foot,
mouth, tongue or ear? (*ś.* 94)

Sadhu, that yogi is my guru
who can untie this song. (ś. 24)

Is there any guru in the world wise enough
to understand the upside-down Veda? (ś. 111)

As the last example suggests, from the riddling poems it is just another small leap to *ulaṭbāṃsī*, the "upside-down language" of paradoxes and enigmas that Kabir inherited from the Sahajiyas and Naths and adapted to his own purposes:[23]

The cow is sucking at the calf's teat,
from house to house the prey hunts,
the hunter hides. (ś. 31)

Sprout without seed, branch without trunk,
fruit without flower, son born
of a sterile womb, climbing a tree
without legs . . . (ś. 16)

It's pouring, pouring, the thunder's roaring,
but not one raindrop falls.
. . . . . .
frog and snake lie down together,
a cat gives birth to a dog,
the lion quakes in fear of the jackal—
these marvels can't be told. (ś. 52)

There is a great diversity in the interpretation of the *ulaṭbāṃsī* poems. It has been questioned whether they are authentic, whether their symbols have the same meaning in Kabir as in the tantric tradition, or whether they have any meaning at all. For the purpose of our brief rhetorical inquiry it is enough to note that these poems fascinate while they perplex the reader, that the images stick in consciousness even when their meaning eludes the mind, initiating a dialogue not only between reader and poet but between the reader and himself, which may go on for years. Riddles and their extension, the paradoxes and enigmas of *ulaṭbāṃsī*, besides being effective rhetorical devices, are teaching devices, comparable to the Zen koan—a problem the student can't solve and can't escape, a matrix of verbal impossibilities in which a transparent truth lies hidden—or perhaps, as the Rigvedic hymn has it, does not.[24]

Structures

It is hazardous to analyze a *pada* by Kabir as if the structure had something inevitable about it. The same song might turn up in another collection in fragments, or with its stanzas reshuffled like a deck of cards. Still, certain principles of structure are apparent; once spotted, they can be recognized again and again. And many poems have a clear unity. They may consist of an extended metaphor, an unfolding argument, a dialogue, or a monologue. These structures reveal both how songs in general are organized for oral performance, and how Kabir in particular organized his utterances to produce the effects he wanted to produce.

Several typical patterns in Kabir depend on repetition with variation. Some poems comprise a series of negations whose syntax can be varied for pleasing effects in sound and rhythm (ś. 43, r. 6). Some are built on anaphora—repetition of a word at the beginning of each line (rs. 3, 7; ś. 71). Or the repeated word may be scattered in different positions ("died" in ś. 45, "look" in ś. 104). The repeated element may be a grammatical structure, like the if-then clauses of śs. 40, 42, and 84, the parallel sentences of ś. 59, the jabbing questions of śs. 98 and 84.

Some poems are catalogues—of Vishnu's incarnations, famous sages, stereotyped fools (śs. 8, 12, 92, 38). One trick of Kabir's is to take a literary convention and turn it upside down. Other poets use the "ten-avatar" sequence to glorify Vishnu's descents; Kabir uses it to ridicule them (ś. 8). The rainbird (*cātaka*) is normally presented as a touching symbol of longing and devotion. Kabir conjures her up to point out her delusion (ś. 71).

Many poems are constructed as dialogues or monologues (śs. 103, 75, 62, 35). Sometimes a single figure is developed throughout a poem: the cow, the flower, the yogi, the con man (śs. 28, 63, 65, 36). Sometimes a series of parallel examples will be brought together in a conclusion, much as a sonnet may in successive quatrains give illustrations which are summed up in the sestet or couplet (e.g., the dog, lion, and elephant of ś. 76).

Perhaps the most consistent structural device in the lyrics is that of the strong "opener" and "clincher" lines that keep Kabir rhetorically in control. We have seen how proficient he is at seizing the audience's attention with intriguing, challenging, shocking addresses at the beginning. He is just as adept at twisting our noses at the end, summing up the poem in a peculiarly powerful way, turning things around unexpectedly, making a wry comment, or jamming on the brakes with a suddenness that sends us hurtling forward into the darkness.

A very simple example of Kabir's effectiveness in framing his song with rhetorical devices at beginning and end may be seen in ś. 43—a straightforward catalogue of negatives stating, in Upanishadic fashion, what the experience of truth is not:

> There's no creation or creator there,
> no gross or fine, no wind or fire,
> no sun, moon, earth or water,
> no radiant form, no time there,
> no word, no flesh, no faith,
> no cause and effect, nor any thought
> of the Veda. No Hari or Brahma,
> no Shiva or Shakti, no pilgrimage
> and no rituals. No mother, father
> or guru there . . .

The poem is musical and memorable, with the repetitious pattern finely modulated to avoid monotony. The whole piece could have been done in this style. But Kabir has another way. Characteristically, he opens with a sharp challenge: "Pandit, you've got it wrong" (literally, "your ideas are false"). Before we know what the poem is about, there is an engagement. We picture a pandit, Kabir's antagonist. He's got something wrong. What is it? From here on all the negatives also call forth the preaching of the pandit, who is fond of talking of creation, the elements, the heavenly bodies, Vedas, deities, karma, dharma. Behind the negatives is a shadowy foil, who is being continually silenced just as he is about to open his mouth.

The flowing pattern of negative statements is broken abruptly in the middle of the penultimate line with a shooting question: "Is it two or one?" The question snaps us out of the lyrical mode, enclosing in its few syllables the whole point of the dispute between pandits and what is beyond panditry. Without a moment's pause, Kabir concludes: "If you understand now, you're guru, I'm disciple." Now, in immediate response to "two or one?" you can understand what the gurus have wrong. To understand is to know very personally the meaning of the negatives: guru bows to disciple, identities are exchanged, distinctions erased.[25]

Actually these last paraphrases are lame, piling words on words. But the sharp formula, "You're guru, I'm disciple," remains in consciousness, revealing its meaning and appropriateness as the song is heard once, twice, or many times.

Ś. 41 provides a more complex example of a unified poem in which a single metaphor is developed to the point of allegory, and the poet plays certain tricks as he moves from opening to closing:

Pandit, look in your heart for knowledge.
Tell me where untouchability
came from, since you believe in it.
Mix red juice, white juice and air—
a body bakes in a body.
As soon as the eight lotuses
are ready, it comes
into the world. Then what's
untouchable?
Eighty-four hundred thousand vessels
decay into dust, while the potter
keeps slapping clay
on the wheel, and with a touch
cuts each one off.
We eat by touching, we wash
by touching, from a touch
the world was born.
So who's untouched? asks Kabir.
Only he
who has no taint of Maya.[26]

The first line presents a typical challenge which (as Kabir's openings are wont to do) cuts the props out from under the addressee. "Pandit, look in your heart for knowledge"—not in your scriptures and commentaries, not in disputations with your friends. The pandit is crippled: if he follows this initial stricture, he won't be a pandit anymore. But Kabir goes on talking in a reasonable fashion. "Tell me where untouchability came from, since you believe in it." Another step is taken to lock the listener into the argument on Kabir's terms. "Well, yes, I do believe in it," the pandit is bound to say, which obliges him somehow to answer the question, "Where does it come from?" He is used to answering questions—that is his stock-in-trade—but here his usual mode of discourse has been cut off in advance by the injunction, "Look in your heart."

Ostensibly we have begun a dialogue; but in fact (as is often the case with Kabir), the primary speaker has a hammerlock on the argument. Or, to use another combative metaphor, the interlocutor receives two swift blows at the start. While Kabir continues the discussion in a leisurely tone, the pandit gasps, holding his solar plexus.[27]

The next couplet demonstrates the illusoriness of untouchability. All bodies are made of the same essential substances; each body is sealed within another body during its formation. At what point can touch, or defilement, take place? These verses create a very interesting picture of the emergent human being: a clay vessel, a string of lotuses. The lotuses are the chakras, which one almost has to imagine as luminous in the dark hollow of clay. They represent the uniqueness of the

human being, the road of liberation, within a creature who is otherwise just an earthy paste of sperm, blood, and breath, like all other creatures.

From this image of an individual person's birth, the poet suddenly shifts perspective to the vast turning of births and deaths in the universe. Millions of clay pots crumble, all have been set up on the same stone wheel, and all are cut off with a touch. "Cutting off" is birth, the separation of the individual.[28] Now the meaning of touching widens. Everything we do in this world is touching, creation itself is a "touch." The word has come to denote duality: it takes two to touch.

The argument in this *pada* turns on Kabir's manipulation of the word *chūti* (modern *chūt*), which is used eight times in seven-and-a-half lines. Basically it means "touch," but in common usage it also means "defiled touch," thence untouchability. By playing on the whole range of possible meanings, Kabir seems to reverse himself. In the first half he says, "No one is touched"; in the second half he says, "No one is untouched." The common argument against untouchability—that everyone is made in the same way from the same stuff, and Shudras are therefore not polluted in relation to Brahmins—receives an uncommon twist. In the new and larger sense of the word *chūti*, the Brahmins are polluted, along with everyone else.

Coming and going, Kabir has proved a radical equality: not only of all people, but of all substances and interactions. The point he makes is no longer social or moral, but ontological. *Chūti* signifies the nature of phenomenal existence, transiency, desire, confusion of birth and death. The only way to be free of that defilement is to end one's contact with Maya.

Ś. 41 is only one of many *pada*s whose metaphors and movements could be analyzed closely. Staying with the same general theme, we could find various poems whose imagery emphasizes the essential equality of all beings (all pots are made of one clay, all ornaments are made of one gold, all men and beasts have red blood).[29] Sā. 107 affirms that, as long as truth is not realized, "all four castes are untouchable." Ś. 47 again has a strong personal opening and closing, develops a central metaphor (the river), and works with "clay."

Ś. 75 operates on the audience in a particularly dramatic fashion. It is one of the most extreme examples of abrupt changes, rushing tempo, careening stops, barrages of words that land like blows, sudden questions that set you spinning and are followed (as you might be opening your mouth to reply) by assaults that turn you upside down.

It's a heavy confusion.
Veda, Koran, holiness, hell—
who's man? who's woman?

A clay pot shot with air and sperm.
When the pot falls apart, what do you call it?
Numskull! You've missed the point.

The diction as well as the structure is bruising; it *hurts*, it is designed to *break* something.

It's all one skin and bone,
one piss and shit,
one blood, one meat.
From one drop, a universe.
Who's Brahmin? Who's Shudra?

This is not argument, but a direct assault on the structures of belief and self-image. The point that is being hammered across reaches its culmination in "From one drop, a universe." The line has several levels of meaning. It suggests not only a universal substance of creation (which is rather a remote, abstract idea), but also an event or experience that breaks through time: creation is instantaneous, a single act fills the universe, a single thought fills consciousness. Not giving the reader a chance to catch his breath after this climax, Kabir shoots another question: "Who's Brahmin? Who's Shudra?" The next verse may be temporarily comforting, for it is a rote repetition of the Hindu "party line" about the three *guṇas* (qualities of matter) and their association with the three gods: "Brahma *rajas*, Shiva *tamas*, Vishnu *sattva* . . ." But he has opened this line of thinking only to cut it off the more forcefully:

Kabir says, plunge into Ram!
There: No Hindu. No Turk.

If you reduce the universe to a drop, then remove (or plunge into) the drop, what do you have? Darkness. No distinctions.

Kabir as the Good Physician

Stanley Fish, in *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, describes an aesthetic which he traces back to Plato and Augustine and demonstrates at length in the works of several seventeenth-century English authors.[30] Though Fish treats the metaphor of the good physician as "one of the most powerful in western literature and philosophy," the aesthetic he elaborates from it is universally applicable. Students of Kabir will vividly recognize their poet in Fish's account of the verbal good physician, who is characterized (in terms based on Plato's *Gorgias*) as a "dialectician" rather than a "rhetorician":

> A dialectical presentation . . . is disturbing, for it requires of its readers a searching and rigorous scrutiny of everything they believe in and live by. It is didactic in a special sense; it does not preach the truth, but asks that its readers discover the truth for themselves, and this discovery is often made at the expense not only of a reader's opinions and values, but of his self-esteem.
>
> . . . The end of a dialectical experience is (or should be) nothing less than a *conversion*, not only a changing, but an exchanging of minds. It is necessarily a painful process . . . in the course of which both parties forfeit a great deal; on the one side the applause of a pleased audience, on the other, the satisfactions of listening to the public affirmation of our values and prejudices.
>
> . . . The good physician may be philosopher, minister, teacher, or even deity, but whatever his status, his strategy and intentions are always the same: he tells his patients what they *don't* want to hear in the hope that by forcing them to see themselves clearly, they will be moved to change the selves they see.
>
> . . . The end of dialectic is not so much the orderly disposition of things in the phenomenal world, as the transformation of the soul-mind into an instrument capable of seeing things in the phenomenal world for what they really are (turning things upside-down). . . .[31]

So Socrates asks in the *Gorgias*:

> To which treatment of the city do you urge me? . . . Is it to combat the Athenians until they become as virtuous as possible, prescribing for them like a physician; or is it to be their servant and cater to their pleasure? . . .[32]

Fish comments that Socrates is here articulating the choice of motives that faces every would-be teacher, writer, or leader:

> . . . whether to strive selfishly for a local and immediate satisfaction or to risk hostility and misunderstanding by pursuing always the best interests of his auditors. . . .[33]

Socrates' choice penetrated his acts as well as his words. With clear understanding he risked and incurred hostility, and finally died for his teaching.

Kabir's attitude is the same. He does not hesitate, in the holiest Hindu city, to attack the kingpins of Hindu society ("Saints, the Brahmin is a slicked-down butcher"); or, in a country ruled by Muslims, to ridicule the religion of the emperor (the Turk "crows 'God! God!' like a cock"). If someone tries to smooth over his insults, saying, "No offense," Kabir will cry like Hamlet, "Yes, but there is, and much offense too!"[34] And he will continue to offend. Though he did not, like Socrates, have to die for his outrages, he does speak of being beaten for tell-

ing the truth, and he often alludes to his isolation, the difficulty of finding anyone who will listen or understand. His constant effort was to strip away disguises, force confrontations, expose lies, promote honesty at every level. His social-satirical poems, his psychological probes, his poems about death, his crazy and paradoxical and mystical poems, do not inhabit separate categories. They are unified by a principle of radical honesty that sweeps through marketplace, temple, body and mind, that will no more allow you to delude yourself than to cheat others, to hack up the truth than to sever the head of an animal.

Kabir's abrupt and jagged style is a technique to jolt and shock people into facing things, to push them over the edge into an understanding that they fear and yet profoundly long for. It also corresponds to, and tones the mind up for, the actual experience of a sudden, unifying insight in the midst of chaotic temporal events.

Concluding Questions

> A self-consuming artifact signifies most successfully when it fails, when it points *away* from itself to something its forms cannot capture.[35]

Kabir may seem to harangue in his more vehement poems against Hindu and Muslim hypocrisy, stupidity, violence, greed. Some of these poems are bound to be inauthentic, for the mode of satirical attack is one of the easiest to imitate. But the variety of Kabir's rhetorical modes and the integrity of the personality that informs them are not easy to imitate. In this rhetoric, the question is as important as the exclamation. We can assemble another pastiche of lines, this time all questions:

For one who doesn't know the secret,
what's the way out?

How to escape the spear?

On this riverbank, saints or thieves?

The three worlds whirl in doubt.
To whom can I explain?

. . . the sky is ripped.
Can a tailor mend it?

What color is a living being?

Where do the senses rest?

Where do the Ram-chanters go?
Where do the bright ones go?

. . . parrot-on-a-pole,
who has caught you?

At whom is Kabir shouting?

In his definition of the dialectical process, Fish describes a change in consciousness of a sort usually spoken of in religious contexts:

> In a dialectical experience, one is moved from the first [discursive or rational way of thinking] to the second way, which has various names, the way of the good, the way of the inner light, the way of faith; but whatever the designation, the moment of its full emergence is marked by the transformation of the visible and segmented world into an emblem of its creator's indwelling presence . . . , and at that moment the motion of the rational consciousness is stilled, for it has become indistinguishable from the object of its inquiry.[36]

Though Fish avoids the troublesome word, what he is talking about is often called mystical experience. When the distinction between subject and object disappears ("consciousness . . . indistinguishable from the object of its inquiry"), the self disappears. We say this coolly, though in fact we have said nothing. It is an unabstractable, indescribable experience. That a person should drop, even for a moment, the conviction of separate selfhood, is the most unlikely eventuality in the world. Any author who can lead his audience to the edge of such an experience has proved himself skillful indeed.

Discussing Augustine, Fish further describes this transformation of consciousness:

> The Christian rhetorician believes in a world everywhere informed and sustained by God's presence . . . a world that, because it is without parts, is without hierarchies, either of persons or of actions. Techniques for dividing and distinguishing, including the rules of rhetoric, are therefore antithetical to his purpose, which is not to persuade to a point, but to a vision in which all points are one (he works to turn the world, as we naturally know it, upside-down). . . .[37]

"Dividing and distinguishing" is the chief activity of the mind and its most powerful tool. It is also, in the view of Fish's authors, and of Kabir, the chief barrier to our understanding things as they actually are. The elaborate tension that Fish so skillfully illuminates in Herbert, Bunyan, and other English authors reflects the interesting fact that the mind is—or seems to be—the only means we have for under-

standing the truth, even if the truth we are reaching for includes the realization that the mind and its ways of perceiving are false. One thinks of Heisenberg destroying the myth of the precise observations of science by proving that the observations are irredeemably distorted by the interference of the measuring device. The dialectician (a word that sounds more rational than *mystic*) responds to the problem by trying to create awareness of the process of dividing and distinguishing, somehow causing the mind to mirror itself, so as initially to engender a doubt about the reliability of our perceptions, and ultimately to dissolve the tight network of divisions and categories in which we are ensnared.

It is one of Kabir's specialties to raise the problem of distinction. He asks, "Is it two or one?" He hovers over boundary lines, or imagined boundary lines—especially those that have to do with our sense of identity.

Kabir says, how to work it out—
I—he—you? (*sā. 312*)

. . . if you understand now,
you're guru, I'm disciple. (*ś. 1*)

He circles around the question of origin, differentiation, the existence of any separate entity, prodding us to determine priority. Which is greater? Which came first? To answer that we have to determine which is which. In ś. 112 he treats this profound metaphysical question as if it were the stuff of a children's argument:

This is the big fight, King Ram.
Let anyone settle it who can.
Is Brahma bigger or where he came from?
Is the Veda bigger or where it was born from?
Is the mind bigger or what it believes in?
Is Ram bigger or the knower of Ram?
Kabir turns round, it's hard to see—
Is the holy place bigger, or the devotee?

The questions all ask us to solve the problem of differentiation. At what point in consciousness is something "born"? When does it separate from "what it was born from"? Where is the line between knower and known? Mind and what is believed in? Outside (holy place) and inside (devotee)?[38]

In one *sākhī* he settles the question in an unsettling way:

If I say one, it isn't so.
If I say two, it's slander.

Kabir thinks carefully:
As it is,
so it is. (*sā.* 120)

Where assertions are inescapably false, questions are conclusions. Kabir opens ś. 67 with a question to end questions:

If seed is form is god,
then, pandit, what can you ask?

If source is the same as realization, conception not separate from creation, and will or creator not separable either ("from one drop, a universe"), then . . . ? Kabir goes on with more questions, but now they seem like mere echoes of the pandit's untenable distinctions, borne away with the breath of Kabir's "where? . . . where?"

Where is the mind?
Where is the intellect?
Where is the ego?
The three qualities,
sattva, *rajas*, *tamas*?

In the next line—"Nectar and poison bloom, fruits ripen"—the poet evokes the whole process of birth, death, karma, recalling lines from the first *ramainī*:

No one knows this ineffable movement.
How could one tongue describe it?
If any man has a million mouths and tongues,
let that great one speak.

Then, in the same sweeping, unexplained style, there is a reference to the possibility of freedom from the interlocking causes and effects of karma:

The Vedas show many ways
to cross the sea.

Finally, in a line that seems to focus on the pronouns "you" and "me," but where these are marvelously balanced, as a juggler balances balls, with other pronouns ("I . . . who . . . who"), the poet asks his most revealing and most conclusive question:

Kabir says, what do I know
of you and me,
of who gets caught
and who goes free?

III. THE UNTELLABLE STORY

Razor-Edge Words

If we hear that the story is untellable—or (hewing closer to Kabir's formula, *akatha kathā*) that the utterance is unutterable—we are likely to focus on the first word, "unutterable." Mystical truth is inexpressible; words are useless.

Actually the second word is just as important as the first. There is an utterance. Words are powerful. *Puruṣa* speaks.[39] Even if he never said any more about it, Kabir would testify to this understanding by the mere fact that he uttered so much. But he does say more. The story is untellable, the supreme experience like the taste of sugar in a dumb man's mouth; yet there is a way of using language that is true. Speaking and listening can reveal. Learning how to speak and listen is essential to the practice implicit in Kabir's teaching:

> Speech is priceless
> if you speak with knowledge.
> Weigh it in the scales of the heart
> before it comes from the mouth. (*sā.* 276)

Scattered through Kabir's sayings is an education on how to use, and how not to use, tongue and ear. There is much talk that is worthless and deluding:

> Pandits sat and read the law,
> babbled of what they never saw. (*ś.* 101)

> Teaching and preaching,
> their mouths filled up with sand. (*sā.* 311)

> If a man can't hold his tongue
> his heart's not true. (*sā.* 83)

> Mind still. Don't talk. (*r.* 51)

> You're a monk? What are you
> if you gab without thinking,
> if you stab other beings
> with the sword of your tongue? (*sā.* 299)

Yet he urges us to listen. In fact, no other word appears so often in the songs as the exhortation, "Listen!" There are different kinds of words, different ways of using words. We need to recognize which are true and which are false.

Between word and word,
plenty of difference.
Churn out the essence-word. (*sā.* 5)

True words are not easy to recognize. They call for a kind of listening which we are not accustomed to doing:

My speech is of the East,
no one understands me. (*sā.* 194)

Kabir says, rare listeners
hear the song right. (*ś.* 95)

When we develop the faculty of listening, we will be able to understand much more than the meaning of the words spoken. We will also know the nature of the speaker.

On this riverbank, saints or thieves?
You'll know as soon as they talk.
The character deep within
comes out by the road of the mouth. (*sā.* 330)

Into a lion's coat
rushes a goat.
You'll recognize him by his talk.
The word reveals. (*sā.* 281)

Most people are well defended against hearing Kabir's words, and he comments ruefully on the futility of trying to reach them.

As a marble on a dome
rolls down,
on a fool's heart, the word
won't pause. (*sā.* 177)

Man in his stupid acts:
iron mail from head to toe.
Why bother to raise your bow?
No arrow can pierce that. (*sā.* 162)

To those who want to know how to recognize true words, Kabir gives strange instructions:

Everyone says words, words.
That word is bodiless.
It won't come on the tongue.
See it, test it, take it. (*sā.* 35)

Kabir says, listen
to the word spoken
in every body. (*sā. 89*)

Kabir says, he understands
whose heart and mouth are one. (*ś. 79*)

We are arriving at a view of language in which truth is gauged not by whether the words are factual or logical, but by what sort of mind they come from, and what they do to the mind they touch. Mr. Fish's dialectician is a good physician who uses words as a doctor uses medicine, to cure not only false ideas but the diseased structure of our thinking. An eighth-century Chinese Zen master also comes up with the "good physician" view of words and their uses:

> All verbal teachings just cure disease; because the diseases are not the same, the medicines are also not the same. . . . True words cure sickness; if the cure manages to heal, then all are true words—if they can't effectively cure sickness, all are false words. True words are false words insofar as they give rise to views; false words are true words insofar as they cut off the delusions of sentient beings. Because disease is unreal, there is only unreal medicine to cure it.[40]

True words are not abstractions, but (as an Indian Buddhist story puts it) symbols and actions.[41] Kabir's utterances act; they not only talk about nonduality, but embody it. This may be seen particularly in the genre of poem known as *ulaṭbāṃsī*, discussed at length in Appendix A. It can also occur in a phrase, or in a single word.

An example of such a word is *bhed*. One dictionary definition is "mystery" or "innermost secret"—meaning the unifying insight that destroys the illusion of separateness. But another definition is "distinction," "separation," "boundary." If we search for the original Sanskrit meaning, we find that it is to pierce or penetrate. What this strange congruence of meanings indicates is that the sword of knowledge simultaneously separates and joins.[42]

Another such word is imbedded in the title *Bījak*, a term from the world of money and trade that means invoice, a list of goods and their values. But another meaning, more common in the Middle Ages, is a guide to hidden treasure, telling what has been hidden and who the owner is.

The resonance of the word becomes more interesting when we look at its root—*bīj*. Literally it means "seed"—the tiny kernel that contains a whole tree. It also means, through religious traditions going back more than 1,000 years before Kabir, *bīja*-mantra, seed-syllable: the one word that can reveal the mystery of existence, the fundamental vibration.

As *bhed* contained both oneness and distinction, *bīj* contains both formlessness and form. For a vibration to exist, there must be a movement of energy—wind or breath—and something for it to vibrate through. Thus the seed-syllable has, or is, form.

But a vibration has no boundaries. It goes on reverberating till it disappears. No one can say exactly when it disappears. Further, if you repeat the word, the source-vibration, then it really has no beginning or end; it is at the same time boundless and concrete, with and without form. This idea is behind the drone instruments that always accompany Indian music. A few strings are plucked in continual, repetitious pattern, a background that yet penetrates everything. If silent mantra practice (*ajapa-japa*) is considered more powerful than repeating the name aloud, it is not that no sound is produced but that the vibration, being the movement of inner energy through our own heartstrings, is most intimate and potent.

Another razor-edge word is *kāl*—death, but also time, with both ideas linked by a short chain of associations to the mind. Kabir often speaks of the deluded mind, equating it with coming and going, swinging, struggling, doubleness. In one *sākhī* the wagging tongue with its "words, words" becomes the swing, and mind is equated with death:

Good words, bad words,
back and forth goes the tongue.
Mind gives a hit:
this way and that.
It's Death behind the swing. (*sā. 84*)

Beneath the protean forms of delusion is one fundamental lie, one fact which we won't face and which, in being denied, falsifies our whole lives. Eventually every one of the gates of the mind opens to it:

The three worlds are a cage,
virtue and vice a net.
Every creature is the prey,
and one hunter:
Death. (*sā. 19*)

Why is the deer thin
by the green
pool? One deer,
a hundred thousand
hunters. How to escape
the spear? (*sā. 18*)

The mind is a nervous thief,
the mind is a pure cheat.
The ruin of sages, men and gods,
the mind has a hundred thousand gates. (*sā.* 96)

One hunter becomes a hundred thousand—or so it seems to the frightened deer, driven by its own fear, running too fast and too constantly to get sustenance from the greenery close at hand. Then the same number is identified with the gates of the mind. The hunters are our imaginings. Our own mental processes are chasing and killing us.

"Death Is Standing on Your Head"[43]

Death is our reliable companion in Kabir. Since it is the one fact we absolutely don't want to face, it is the fact he harps on. He turns our eyes toward the inevitable destruction of our bodies, dwelling on such details as fire licking through the bones, maggots eating the flesh, crows tearing at the skull.[44] This is not done out of a love for the macabre; rather, these details are woven into a dialogue with the reader which is aimed at waking him up, making him face life by facing death.

For it is an intriguing irony that by denying death we also deny life. Death gives our life its urgency, makes us honest. Death forces us to remember that we do not have forever to do our work, clean up our messes, straighten out our confusion. We have certain precious opportunities, the greatest being attainment of a human birth, which according to tradition occurs only once in 8,400,000 lives. But we squander this priceless jewel. In the round of myriad births and deaths, a human life is like the ripe moment for an ambush . . . missed (sā. 113). Fallen fruit does not return to the branch; the dead do not send back news (sās. 115, 320). We spend our lives pursuing money, power, pleasure. Only when it is too late do we realize what we have done.

From a little money
a man goes crazy.
He doesn't hear news
of the King of Death.
When the terror comes
his face shrivels.
Cheated, he learns
his nectar was poison. (*r.* 21)

Many of us do not even wake up enough to be terrified at the last moment:

Even now you lounge in bed
as Yama's club
falls
on your head. (*ś.* 99)

Kabir sometimes borrows the name of the Hindu god of death, Yama. More often he uses the word *kāl*, which everyone understands as a vague personification of death, but whose root meaning is time.

The emphasis on time and death accounts for much of the urgency and intensity associated with Kabir. It dramatizes—not for the sake of drama, but because, really, each moment is a life-and-death affair:

Keep remembering Ram,
Death has you by the hair.
He'll strike at home or in foreign lands,
you never know when or where. (*r.* 19)

How will we live this moment? In the midst of distraction will we recognize what is essential and grasp it? Only by continuing to lie to ourselves and others do we manage to stay confused on this point:

Think: what's the way to end sorrow?
Break your engagement with lies.
Your birth is guttering out in greed,
old age and death crowd close. (*r.* 23)

The essence of Kabir's effort as a teacher may be stated plainly: he wants to make people honest. He believes that complete honesty (and nothing else) provides a realization of complete truth—understanding of the nature of consciousness, the relation of individual and universe, inside and outside, life and death. There seems to be a God at the heart of his enlightenment. But the question of whether a divine "entity" exists is not crucial to what he is doing. Worrying over this question is a form of delusion (as the Upanishads indicated 2,000 years ago by saying, "not . . . not . . . not . . ." in defense against anyone's trying to stake out a definition of the supreme being). Kabir the weaver is a practical man. Dedicated to radical honesty, he gets his blunt but skillful fingers into our minds and turns things up, exposes falsehood, from the grossest outer deceptions to the slipperiest inner delusions. He knows that the growth of honesty, or courage, has its own gathering momentum, and he trusts the outcome.

Moving from truth to truth,
what can destroy you? (*sā.* 308)

Concentration Is Entry into Death

There is a line in the *Mahābharata* to the effect that, while seeing people dying on all sides and knowing that death is inevitable, everyone manages to believe that he will be the miraculous exception.[45]

The fear of death is at the root of our delusion. In *ulaṭbāṃsī* poems such as "Who will be sheriff? . . ." and "Brother, see what comforts man," Kabir points to our compulsive, and doomed, efforts to achieve security.[46] Often he uses the image of a house, both for the body we like to believe marks off our identity, and for everything else we think we possess.

The fool doesn't have a thought
as he sits in his house of sand. (*ś.72*)

Stupefied men say, "My house!"
That house you're sleepwalking in
isn't yours. (*ś.85*)

So many owners share this body. (*r.78*)

As the city blazes the watchman
sleeps happily, thinking,
"My house is secure.
Let the town burn, as long as my things
are safe." (*ś.58*)

Like many other teachers (including those who teach *saguṇa bhakti*),[47] Kabir suggests that concentration is the key for transforming this state of profound delusion into an all-pervading clarity; and the "device" he offers is the Word, or the name of Ram. But it is clear that no mere mechanical repetition or outwardly pious repetition of the name will be effective. To drive this point home, Kabir satirizes the Ram-chanters along with all the other hypocrites and fools:

"Ram! Ram!" they cry,
till there's a callus on their tongue. (*r.33*)

If saying Ram gave liberation,
saying candy made your mouth sweet,
saying fire burned your feet,
saying water quenched your thirst,
saying food banished hunger,
the whole world would be free. (*ś.40*)

You have to make the experience concretely your own:

If you don't see, if you don't touch,
what's the use of the name?
If saying money made you rich,
nobody would be poor. (*ś.* 40)

Conformity is not the way.

You don't find:
diamonds in storerooms,
sandal trees in rows,
lions in flocks,
holy men in herds. (*sā.* 172)

You can't get it from someone else.

Use the strength of your own arm,
stop putting hope in others.
When the river flows through your own yard,
how can you die of thirst? (*sā.* 277)

You can't give it to someone else.

Go home, doctor.
No one's asking you.
The one who put on this burden
will have to take care of it. (*sā.* 310)

In fact, most people don't want this word. With characteristic two-edged mockery, Kabir sketches a cartoon of himself as teacher:

Kabir goes on shouting,
perched on a sandal tree.
I show the way, they don't take it.
What's the loss to me? (*sā.* 63)

People don't want the word because it is very costly. To get it you have to climb a trail narrower than an ant's foot; yet fools want to go with loaded bullocks (sā. 33). Kabir will not be fooled; for his word, he will exact the full price:

No customers for the word,
the price is high.
Without paying, you can't get it,
so move on by. (*sā.* 326)

Another marketplace metaphor emphasizes the unpopularity of the product, though people think they want it:

Where buyers swarm, I'm not.
Where I am, there's no buyer.
Without awareness they wander
plucking at shadows
of the word. (*sā.* 289)

To find this word you have to leave behind not only your bullock loaded with possessions, but also your friends, relatives, and priests:

The road the pandits took,
crowds took.
Ram's pass is a high one.
Kabir keeps climbing. (*sā.* 31)

In fact you are going to be alone—as alone as if you were dead:

A man's wife goes with him to the door,
his friends go a few steps more.
At the corpse-ground there's only the stretcher.
After that, swan, you're on your own. (*ś.* 73)

Kabir is going to take you—if you want to hear his word—to a place of no help, no hope, no solace. He refers to the delusional nature of hope, which is hope for some *thing*, some security against the nothingness we fear. This hope must be jettisoned.[48] He exposes the silly ways in which we comfort ourselves, showing a comic strip of animals mimicking our little dramas of marriage and domestic flurry.[49] He leads us to a place where there will be nothing under our feet, and invites us to step off.

"A Moment's Absence: A Dead Man!"

The words are scrawled on a painting by Hakuin, a seventeenth-century Japanese Zen master and artist.[50] The connection between Hakuin's observation and Kabir's teaching may be illustrated by an anecdote from the Ramlila, the annual drama-festival in which the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic—the story of Lord Vishnu's descent as King Ram—is acted out. At the famous Ramlila of Ramnagar, a month-long performance, I once met an old sadhu. He was an emotional man who said he followed the *mādhurya mārg*, or path of sweetness, sweet love for the Vaishnava avatars Ram and Krishna. In the Ramlila he used to run after the boys who played Ram and his brothers and queen, the divine embodiments, crying out their names, intimate epithets, and victory shouts, tears rolling down his face. One evening he told me a story about how Kabir repeated the name of Ram day and night, without interruption. But once for some unexplained reason, he missed two

Rams. He began to cry. He wept inconsolably, for hours, a whole night. Towards dawn Lord Ram himself came down to comfort his devotee, to assure him that he was well pleased with his disciple's unflagging love and practice. Kabir, still uncomforted, replied, "I have missed two opportunities to say the name of Ram. Never can I regain the joy of those two lost names."

Coming out of the devotional heat of the Ramlila, the story misses the flavor of Kabir as we know him through his own works. But if we remove the filter of *bhakti* emotionalism we will find a spirit not very far from Hakuin's. Both Hakuin and Kabir tell us that every moment in which our attention is not clear, our mind not centered in the "essence-word," we are as dead, swept along like corpses in the swirling river in which no foot can be planted (sā. 79).

The use of one Hindi word, *kāl*, to express both time and death is not surprising. We know the passage of time brings us inexorably toward our own death. So we fear transiency, "coming and going." We try to hide the fact that time is passing. We cling to the appearances of youth, the trappings of security: attractive bodies, stratagems to keep ourselves from deteriorating, wealth, power, family, orthodoxy.[51] While trying to pretend that these things are permanent, we know they are not. At the very moment that we are lulling ourselves with status and buffering ourselves with possessions, death is perched on our heads, or eating away inside our bodies like a termite in a wood house (sās. 102, 103). However we may try to run from the fact, we know that transiency means death. Nothing is fixed. No boundary line lasts. Every moment brings the death of things as they were at the last moment. Our own identities (this is the most threatening) are unseizable.

Now a curious thing happens. When, fearing death, we try to stop time, or transfix experience, we actually kill it. By immobilizing things we make them dead. This is Hakuin's point. In concentration our consciousness exists only moment-to-moment; we cannot stop to cling. When we abandon concentration—awareness in the living moment—we are absent, dead.

Does this mean that what we imagined and feared as death (continual change) is actually life, and what we tried to grasp as life (permanence) is death? Not exactly. The intertwining is more complete than that. Death and life are one. If you can't die, you can't live.

Concentration is not to be thought of as escape from transiency. It is more like acceptance of it.[52] By a strange coincidence, when we give ourselves to the Word (or to any object of meditation, any simple vow)—which is to say when we assent to change, the flow of time, the loss of our familiar selves and all things as we know them, every moment—we find stillness. This is because in such concentration we can-

not hold on to past or future. There is only present. Without past or future, there is no cause and effect. We are released from karma.[53] The object of meditation disappears:

When there isn't a trace
of creation or destruction,
what do you meditate on? (ś. 74)

The subject of meditation disappears:

What form or shape to describe?
What second one is there to see? (r. 6)

But this loss of identity is not threatening. Liberation means freedom from the fear of death. We can know this at any moment that we choose to enter the Word:

Pandit, do some research
and let me know
how to destroy transiency.
Money, religion, pleasure, salvation—
which way do they stay, brother?
North, South, East or West?
In heaven or the underworld?
If Gopal is everywhere, where is hell?

Heaven and hell are for the ignorant,
not for those who know Hari.
The fearful things that everyone fears,
I don't fear.
I'm not confused about sin and purity,
heaven and hell.
Kabir says, seekers, listen:
Wherever you are
is the entry point. (ś. 42)

VI. "NUMSKULL, YOU'VE MISSED THE POINT!"[54]

And so have we, of course—the writer and readers of this introduction.

Once in India I met someone who seemed to me to be like Kabir. He was a member of the Kabir sect, though an odd one, not like the usual Kabir Panthis who clumped together around their temples, followed the daily rituals, and did what their superiors told them. This man, called Gayabanandji, was more of a wanderer.[55] After joining the sect he had gone off by himself to the mountains, someone said. He wore a round pin with a picture of Kabir the way the sectarians imagine him

to look, wearing a pointed mitre like those worn by the heads of the sect. He told me he had three gurus: the teacher in his home branch of the Panth; Satguru Kabir; and the guru within.

We met in 1976 at the Kumbha Mela, that monstrous gathering of pilgrims, monks, yogis, gurus, disciples, devotees in the millions, that takes place every twelve years in Allahabad. For a month beginning in January the broad V of dry sand between the converging Ganga and Jamuna rivers becomes a metropolis of tiny and colossal tents, makeshift shops, strings of light bulbs, lanterns and fires, and innumerable loudspeakers.The Kumbha Mela is like the monarch over hundreds of lesser religious fairs throughout India. It is the sort of place where Kabir might well have sat among the crowds of seekers and sharpies, shouting, "Hey saints! Listen sadhus!"

I was at one of the Kabir Panth camps talking politely with gurus and officials. Gayabanandji came into the small tent and sat down. I had asked for help on an obscure line in a poem, and two pandit-types were going at it—the usual tug-of-war between ignorance and commentaries, punctuated by stabs at Sanskrit etymology and quotations from the *Bhagavad Gītā*. After listening a few minutes he said, "Stop your controversies. Nothing will come of that." Then he explained his own understanding. He talked about the animal symbolism of the poem. There was a bullock who was cast as *paṭwārī*, a rural accountant who keeps records of land, revenues, harvests, and so on. A bull is a fool, said Gayabanandji, he is stupid. The *paṭwārī* writes and writes about what other people have harvested, but gets nothing for himself.[56]

At some point I realized he was talking about me. My hand stopped over the notebook. I looked up and saw him looking at me.

"You may write and write, ask and ask, but you will get nothing. *He* will get something." He touched an old man sitting next to him, who smiled slightly. "From worship, from meditation, you get something."

He spoke of two other problematic words in the poem. "*Kār*, *dukār*. Good works, bad works. Many people talk about good work, good action. But they don't do it. They talk about holiness, then go home and get drunk."

He outlined a system of four levels of experiences: *vikār*, *sanskār*, *subhāv*, *swabhāv*.

Vikār is the level of the gross senses, where we are no more than animals. We sleep, eat, have sex, crave, try to grab things from each other, get angry.

Sanskār is civilization, courtesy, bowing, saluting, saying "sir"—forms which symbolize something. The word for culture (*sanskṛti*) comes from the same root.

Subhāv is goodwill, kindness, compassion.

Swabhāv is samadhi (meditation), beyond talking, literally "own-nature."

From these four everything is made. Through these four, he said, I would understand myself, the world, the poetry of Kabir.

From the moment I got the message that I was a *paṭwārī*, I was ashamed. Could I ask more questions? And take more notes? And carry on with my distracted life? I remembered that earlier someone had tossed off the comment that the motive for doing translations might be to make a name for oneself.

I told Gayabanandji I wanted to ask him a personal question. Should I be trying to do this work? He laughed. "Oh, the work is very good."

"The work is good," I said, "but is the worker?"

He said, "Look, the work is good for you because it makes you sit with saints and sadhus. You may learn something from that. You are not yet developed." At first I didn't understand the word he used for "developed." He said, "You know *bīj*?" Yes, that was seed. "You know *vrikṣa*?" That was tree. "So to grow from seed to tree is to become developed. You are not fully developed. So—" He pointed to my dress. "Here it's red. Here it's blue. It's not just one color. Both colors shine, don't they? Both colors show." So, he implied, my good works and my bad works, my grossness and fineness, both showed.

I asked him to come to Varanasi and help me. If I was going to do this work, I wanted his help. He said he might stop in Varanasi after leaving the Mela. But I didn't think he would. He had given me his message. Like Kabir, he had managed to show through this very situation the lack of honesty in my life; he had made me reflect on how, in this task, I was moved by confusion and greed, was using Kabir and him for my mixed purposes, was like the bull-*paṭwārī* who records others' harvests without growing anything himself.

Sometimes he would talk very loud. Sometimes he would be so quiet you could hardly hear him. Sometimes he would sit still and not say anything. Sometimes he would make a sudden noise, clap his hands sharply, sharply. "*Kuch bajega*!" he would shout, clapping his hands—Something will ring! As if urgently trying to impress on me the difference between my book-learning and some real experience, he would talk about a process leading to samadhi, and suddenly, clapping his hands loud and fast, he would repeat, "*Kuch bajega*! *Kuch bajega*!"

Something will ring! Something will ring!

Translations

Śabda*

2[1]

Saints, once you wake up, don't doze off.[2]
Time can't eat you, eons can't swallow you,
age and decay can't waste you.
Turned-around Ganga dries up the ocean,[3]
swallows the moon and sun.[4]
The sick man rests, having toppled nine houses.
A shadow burns on the water.
A man without feet runs everywhere,
without eyes sees the world.
Turned-around rabbit swallows a lion.
Marvelous! Who understands?
An upside-down pot won't go under,
a straight pot fills with water.[5]
A man stays separate for his own reasons,
the guru's grace brings him over.
In his cave he sees the world,
outside he sees nothing.
Turned-around arrow strikes the hunter,
the fearless understand.
The singer never sings,
the silent one sings always.
The actor plays, he sees
the show, a boundless love
still grows, he seeks
his own sound, his own
seed—this story
can't be told.[6]
Turned-around earth pierces the sky,
the great being speaks.[7]
Without a cup nectar is sipped,
streams swell with water.
Kabir says, he lives from age to age
who tastes the liquor of Ram.

*The numbering of the original *Bijak* has been retained for the convenience of those who wish to look up the poems in Hindi. Further notes will be found starting on p. 176.

3

Seekers, the house is full of quarrels.
Night and day they're at each other's throats,
five fellows and a woman.
Everyone wants a different diet,
and those five have big appetites.[1]
No one listens to anyone else,
they just follow their own whims.
Wipe out that bad-thinking, bad-luck woman,[2]
crush those boys!
Kabir says, my kind of people
can settle these household frays.

4

Saints, I see the world is mad.
If I tell the truth they rush to beat me,
if I lie they trust me.
I've seen the pious Hindus, rule-followers,
early morning bath-takers—
killing souls, they worship rocks.
They know nothing.
I've seen plenty of Muslim teachers, holy men
reading their holy books
and teaching their pupils techniques.
They know just as much.
And posturing yogis, hypocrites,
hearts crammed with pride,
praying to brass, to stones, reeling
with pride in their pilgrimage,
fixing their caps and their prayer-beads,
painting their brow-marks and arm-marks,
braying their hymns and their couplets,
reeling. They never heard of soul.
The Hindu says Ram is the Beloved,
the Turk says Rahim.
Then they kill each other.
No one knows the secret.
They buzz their mantras from house to house,
puffed with pride.

The pupils drown along with their gurus.
In the end they're sorry.
Kabir says, listen saints:
they're all deluded!
Whatever I say, nobody gets it.
It's too simple.[1]

5

Saints, a huge surprise:
If I tell, who will believe it?
Just one man, just one woman—
imagine that!
In just one egg all eighty-four,[1]
and a universe
lost in delusion.
Just one woman spread her net,
the world filled with confusion.
Searching, they couldn't find the end,
not Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva.
The snake-noose tightens in the body,[2]
the world's plundered, they struggle
without the sword of knowledge,
no one can lay a hand on her.
She alone is root, flower, garden,
she herself plucks and eats.
Kabir says, only those are free
whom the guru has shaken
awake.

6[1]

Saints, a great surprise.
A son grabbed his mother,
a crazy girl took off with her father
and stayed a virgin.
She dropped her husband
and went with her father-in-law.
Would you believe it?
With her brother she went
to the in-laws' house

and played jealous co-wife
with her mother-in-law.
Husband's sister and brother's wife
hatched plots, and used my name.
She never went near the in-laws' in-laws[2]
but easily took over
the household.
Kabir says, seekers, listen:
one born a man
became a woman.

7

Saints, if I speak
who will believe it?
If I lie
it passes for truth.
I glimpsed a jewel,
unpierced and priceless,
without buyer or seller.
Glittering, gleaming, it flashed
in my eyes,and filled
the ten directions.
A touch of grace
from the guru:
the invisible, markless
appeared.
Simple meditation,
absolute stillness[1]
awakened. Simply
I met Ram.[2]
Wherever I look,
only this, only this.[3]
The diamond pierced
my ruby heart.
Through the guru
comes the supreme.
Thus teaches Kabir.

8

Seekers, what comes and goes is Maya.[1]
The guardian knows no time,
never went anywhere, never came.
The beloved—could he be a turtle or a fish?
Does he go around killing goblins?
He is kind, he knows no rancor.
Tell me, who should he kill?
Don't call the master a boar,
he never held this heavy world.
Such work is not the lord's,
the world lies.
Everyone believes in the fellow
who burst from a pillar;
but he whose claws ripped out the king's belly,
he's not the maker.
That dwarf-shape didn't test Bali,
the tester was Maya.
Witless, the whole world reels in confusion,
Maya's delusion.
Parashuram never slew any princes,
Maya pulled that trick.
The guru knows nothing
of devotion or separation[2]—
the creatures are deceived.
The creator didn't marry Sita,
didn't tie up the sea with stones.
Those who pray to Raghunath as the one
are praying in the dark.
With cowherds and milkmaids
he didn't come to Gokul,
the maker never killed Kamsa.
He is gracious, everyone's lord,
doesn't conquer, doesn't defeat.
Don't call the master Buddha,
he didn't put down devils.
They call these the maker
in mindless confusion,
Maya's delusion.
The maker won't become Kalki,

won't beat up a future fiend.
Maya set up all these traps
to drive the pure ones from their paths.
The ten avatars are divine malarkey
for those who really know.
Kabir says, pay attention saints:
only second things bloom and blow.

10

Saints, I've seen both ways.
Hindus and Muslims don't want discipline,
they want tasty food.
The Hindu keeps the eleventh-day fast[1]
eating chestnuts and milk.
He curbs his grain but not his brain
and breaks his fast with meat.
The Turk prays daily, fasts once a year,
and crows "God! God!" like a cock.
What heaven is reserved for people
who kill chickens in the dark?
For kindness and compassion
they've cast out all desire.
One kills with a chop, one lets the blood drop,[2]
in both houses burns the same fire.
Turks and Hindus have one way,
the guru's made it clear.
Don't say Ram, don't say Khuda.[3]
So says Kabir.

11

Saints, the Brahmin is a slicked-down butcher.
He slaughters a goat and rushes for a buffalo
without a twinge of pain in his heart.
He lounges after his bath, slaps sandalpaste
on his brow, does a song and dance
for the Goddess, crushes souls
in the wink of an eye—
the river of blood flows on.
How holy! What a superior race! What authority

in society, and how people grovel
to get his initiation!
It makes me laugh.
They tell tales about ending sin
but their actions are base.
I've seen two of them throttle each other,
but Yama carted off both.[1]
Kabir says, saints, this is Kaliyug:[2]
the age of phony Brahmins.

12

Saints, they're flushed, they're drink-drunk![1]
They tippled a couple of cups
of that sweet juice of love
and flushed seven colors of drunk.[2]
They built a distillery, mixed
higher and lower, then drained the lip-puckering
dregs. No more dirty reactions.[3]
They plugged up Passion's holes. Now the juice
runs endlessly down the chute.
Gorakh, Vasishtha, the bard Vyasa, Narada, Shukdev
clasp hands,
while in a tight clutch sit Shiva and Brahma's boys,
heads back, lips curled like teacups.
Likewise Ambarishi, Yagyavalkya, and that fool
Jarabharat, along with Vishnu's serpent,
his thousand mouths gaping. How high should I count?
Homeless ones, palace dwellers, mad.
Dhruva, Prahlad, Vibhishan, drunk. The woman who tasted plums
for Ram, stoned out of her mind.[4]
The ineffable Absolute, drunk in Vrindavan,
still can't shake off the hangover.
Gods and sages, males and females,
Hindus and Muslims—drinkers are knowers.
Sugar in a dumb man's mouth. How (asks Kabir)
to describe it?

14

Oh Ram! The knot of confusion
won't loosen, so Death

keeps plucking you off.[1]
Monks and yogis give up their pedigrees
but still brag of their lineage.[2]
Knowers and heroes, poets, philanthropists,
people with all sorts of talents
can't break through
this state of mind.
They read hymns, legends and laws
but miss the experience.
How can iron turn to gold
without touching the touchstone?
If you don't cross over alive,
how can you cross when you're dead?
Alive, you're not crossing!
Wherever you put your faith,
that's where you'll be at death.[3]
Clever man! Whatever you've done,
wise or foolish, try to understand.
Kabir asks: what can you say about people
who don't see what they're staring at?

15[1]

King Ram! The old woman ordered some weaving
after the weaver left home.[2]
Nine yards, ten yards, nineteen yards
the warp is stretched.
Seven threads, nine twists, seventy-two across—
it's really a big one.
No scale can weigh, no yardstick can measure,
but it fits in a two-kilo crock.[3]
It doesn't stretch or shrink by a speck
but the housewife kicks up a row
with her husband, rants and raves.[4]
The thread gets wet, the warp is wrecked,
the weaver goes away mad.
Kabir says, who created this?
Stop spreading yourself out thin,
worship Ram, it's harsh,
this life-and-death ocean.

23

Hermit, nature has unnatural ways.
She smiles on a pauper and makes him a king,
she turns a king to a beggar.
She keeps the clove tree from bearing fruit,
the sandalwood from blooming.[1]
Fish hunt in the forest,
lions swivel in the ocean,
the castor-oil plant turns to Mysore sandal,
its fragrance bursts
in four directions.
Three spheres are cut
from the cosmic egg,
a blind man watches the show.
A cripple leaps over Mount Sumeru, swings free
Through the three worlds.[2]
A dumb man illumines
knowledge and ignorance, pronouncing
an endless word.
He ties up the sky and hurls it down
to the snake-world. A serpent
rules heaven.[3]
Kabir says: Ram is king.
Whatever he does
is natural.[4]

24

Hermit, that yogi is my guru
who can untie this song.
A tree stands without root,
without flowers bears fruit;
no leaf, no branch, and eight
sky-mouths thundering.[1]
Dance done without feet,
tune played without hands,[2]
praises sung without tongue,
singer without shape or form—
the true teacher reveals.
Seek the bird's, the fish's path.

Kabir says, both are hard.
I offer myself to an image:
the great being beyond boundaries
and beyond beyond.[3]

28[1]

Brother, the creator gave us a cow.
She's horribly heavy, brother.
She takes in water through all nine holes
but it doesn't quench her thirst.
They locked up seventy-two apartments
with adamant doors,
buried a stake and tied her to it
with unbreakable cords,
but she broke loose.
Four trees, six branches, eighteen leaves:
she grabbed them all and bolted—
an incorrigible cow.
Seven and seven, nine and fourteen, brother—
she ate them all and grew fat,
but still wasn't full.
The cow lives in a town, brother,
and has white horns.
She's neither colored nor colorless,[2]
she eats what's edible
and inedible.
Brahma and Vishnu searched, brother,
Shiva and Sanaka too,
countless adepts joined the hunt,
but no one could find the cow.
Kabir says, did you get the poem?
Did you figure out the cow?[3]
If so you'll get ahead,
you'll settle things somehow.

30

Brother, where did your two gods come from?
Tell me, who made you mad?
Ram, Allah, Keshav, Karim, Hari, Hazrat—

so many names.
So many ornaments, all one gold,
it has no double nature.[1]
For conversation we make two—
this *namāz*, that *pujā*,
this Mahadev, that Muhammed,
this Brahma, that Adam,
this a Hindu, that a Turk,
but all belong to earth.
Vedas, Korans, all those books,
those Mullas and those Brahmins—
so many names, so many names,
but the pots are all one clay.
Kabir says, nobody can find Ram,
both sides are lost in schisms.
One slaughters goats, one slaughters cows,
they squander their birth in isms.

31

Oh swan, the knife of doubt cuts deep.[1]
The cow is sucking at the calf's teat,
from house to house the prey hunts,
the hunter hides,
hot sand churns in the water,
dust-waves surge,
rain from earth soaks the clouds,
the banks are swimming.
The swan has flown, the pond is dry,
a foot is stuck in the mud.[2]
As long as hand waggles and toe stirs,
there's no hope.
If a man can't see how things move,
don't trust him, says Kabir.[3]

32

Hey swan, clear your mind
in the morning. They've set
so many snares, knit the net
of three qualities

52

and trapped the world.
If the landlord is a butcher,
why think about the tenants?[1]
Those who have no devotion
are called devotees;
they fling away nectar
and swallow poison.
The brightest ones have sunk,
not listening to what I said.
What I said was, tie your bundle tight,
stay alert day and night.
Kaliyug's crafty gurus entice the world
to destroy it.[2]
Veda and Koran are traps laid
for poor souls to tumble in.[3]
Kabir says, if you meet the one
who can extricate you,
you won't forget it.

33

Dear swan, where will you go
when you leave the lake?[1]
You used to peck up pearls there
and taste such pleasures—
now water shrinks from the leaves,
the bed is dry, the lotus withers.
What's taken away today, says Kabir,
will it come again tomorrow?

34

The blessed one wanders free as a swan[1]
speaking the spotless name.
With a pearl in his beak he lures the world,[2]
silent or singing God's fame.
On Mansarovar's shore he dwells,
cool at the feet of Ram.
No stupid crow can come near
that visionary swan.

Those who can separate milk from water,
I call them mine, says Kabir.

36

That con man Hari has conned the world,
but brother, who can live without him?[1]
Who's whose husband? Who's whose wife?
Death's gaze spreads—untellable story.
Who's whose father? Who's whose son?
Who suffers? Who dies?
With his conjuring he snatches away
your roots.[2] No one can see
Ram's trickery.
Kabir's heart accepts the thief.
Cheating disappears
when you recognize the cheat.

37

The trickster Hari roves through the world
pulling tricks, and saying
nothing. Oh childhood friend,
when you left me,
where did you go that morning?
You're the only man,
I'm your woman.
Your footstep is heavier than stone.
The flesh is clay, the body air.
I'm afraid of Hari's tricks,
says Kabir.

38

Without Hari he's befuddled,
without a guru he's a mess.
Everywhere he goes
he loses himself
in nets within nets.
The yogi says, "Yoga's the top,
don't talk of seconds."

54

Tuft of hair, shaven head, matted locks, vow of silence—
who's gotten anywhere?
Brainy ones, gifted ones,
heroes, poets, benefactors
cry, "I'm the greatest!"
They all go back where they came from
and don't take anything along.
Drop that wretched right hand and left
and grab Hari's feet—these very feet!
Kabir says, the dumb man has tasted sugar.
If you ask, what will he say?

39

Here's how the world fights against God:
as a snake grabs Garuda,[1]
a mouse loves a cat,
or jackals strike lions.
What a wonderful world,
where dogs conquer elephants!
Kabir says, listen seekers, brothers:
a rare person
makes the connection.[2]

40

The pandits' pedantries are lies.

If saying Ram gave liberation
  saying candy made your mouth sweet
  saying fire burned your feet,[1]
  saying water quenched your thirst,
  saying food banished hunger,
the whole world would be free.

The parrot gabbles "God" like a man
but doesn't know God's glory.
When he flies off to the jungle,
he'll forget God.
If you don't see, if you don't touch,
what's the use of the name?

If saying money made you rich,
nobody would be poor.

Lovers of lust and delusion
laugh at the lovers of God.

Kabir says, worship the one Ram,
or you'll go, trussed up, to Death City.

41

Pandit, look in your heart for knowledge.
Tell me where untouchability
came from, since you believe in it.
Mix red juice, white juice and air—
a body bakes in a body.[1]
As soon as the eight lotuses
are ready, it comes
into the world. Then what's
untouchable?
Eighty-four hundred thousand vessels
decay into dust, while the potter
keeps slapping clay
on the wheel, and with a touch
cuts each one off.
We eat by touching, we wash
by touching, from a touch
the world was born.
So who's untouched? asks Kabir.
Only he
who has no taint of Maya.

42

Pandit, do some research
and let me know
how to destroy transiency.
Money, religion, pleasure, salvation—
which way do they stay, brother?[1]
North, South, East or West?

56

In heaven or the underworld?
If Gopal is everywhere, where is hell?

Heaven and hell are for the ignorant,
not for those who know Hari.
The fearful thing that everyone fears,
I don't fear.
I'm not confused about sin and purity,
heaven and hell.
Kabir says, seekers, listen:
Wherever you are
is the entry point.[2]

43

Pandit, you've got it wrong.
There's no creator or creation there,
no gross or fine, no wind or fire,
no sun, moon, earth or water,
no radiant form, no time there,
no word, no flesh, no faith,
no cause and effect, nor any thought
of the Veda. No Hari or Brahma,
no Shiva or Shakti, no pilgrimage
and no rituals. No mother, father
or guru there. Is it two or one?
Kabir says, if you understand now,
you're guru, I'm disciple.

44

Think, pandit, figure it out:
male or female?[1]
In a Brahmin's house she's Mrs. Brahmin,
in a yogi's she's a disciple.
Reading the Koran she's a Turkish lady.
In Kaliyug she lives alone.[2]
She doesn't choose a husband,
doesn't get married,
but has sons.
Not a single black-haired fellow escapes her,

but she's a permanent virgin.
She stays with her mother,
doesn't join her in-laws,
won't sleep with her husband.
Kabir says, he lives from age to age
who drops his family, caste and race.

45

Hey pandits, who didn't die?
If you find out, tell me.

Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva died,
Parvati's son Ganesha died,
so many suns and moons died,
Hanuman the bridgebuilder died,
Krishna died, the maker died.
One, the Original, didn't die.

No fall, no rise.
Kabir says, that one never dies.

47[1]

Pandit, think
before you drink
that water.
That house of clay you're sitting in—
all creation is pouring through it.
Fifty-five million Yadavs soaked there,
and eighty-eight thousand sages.
At every step a prophet is buried.
All their clay has rotted.
Fish, turtles and crocodiles
hatched there. The water is thick
with blood. Hell flows
along that river, with
rotten men and beasts.
Trickling through bones, melting through flesh—
where does milk come from?
That's what you drink after lunch, pandit.

58

And you call clay untouchable?
Throw out your holy scriptures, pandit,
those fantasies of your mind.
Kabir says, listen, Brahmin:
All this
is your own doing.

52[1]

Think about it, knower of Brahma.
It's pouring, pouring, the thunder's roaring,
but not one raindrop falls.
An elephant's tied to an ant's foot,
a sheep eats a wolf,
a fish jumps out of the ocean
and builds a house on the beach.[2]
Frog and snake lie down together,
a cat gives birth to a dog,
the lion quakes in fear of the jackal—
these marvels can't be told.
Who tracks down the deer of doubt
in the forest? The archer aims,
trees burn in the sea,
a fish plays hunter.
Oh, what marvelous knowledge!
If anyone can hear,
he'll fly to the sky without wings
and live, not die, says Kabir.

53

If you can see that tree
you'll be free
from age and death.
The tree is a whole world.
From one trunk burst three boughs,
the middle bough has four fruits,
and leaves and branches—who can count them?
A creeper clings to the three
spheres, wraps tight
so even the wise ones

can't get free.
Kabir says, I go on shouting
and the pandits go on thinking.

54

She went with her husband to the in-laws' house
but didn't sleep with him,
didn't enjoy him.
Her youth slipped away like a dream.
Four met and fixed the marriage date,
five came and fixed the canopy,
girlfriends sang the wedding songs
and rubbed on her brow the yellow paste
of joy and sorrow.[1]
Through many forms her mind turned
as she circled the fire.
The knot was tied, the pledge was made,
the married women poured the water.
Yet with her husband on the wedding square
she became a widow.[2]
She left her marriage without the groom.
On the road the father-in-law explained.[3]
Kabir says, I'm off to my real marriage now.[4]
I'll play the trumpet
when I cross with my lord.

55[1]

Brother, see what comforts man—
it's an untellable story.
Lion and tiger are yoked to a plow
sowing rice in a barren field.
The wild bear is pulling weeds,
the billy goat runs the farm.
The nanny goat married a lion
while a cow sang wedding songs.
The dowry was an antelope,
the bridesmaid was a lizard.
The crow washed all the laundry
while the heron gnashed its teeth.

60

The fly shaved its head, shouting,
I must join the marriage party!
Kabir says, can you
figure out this
poetry?
If so I'll call you
scholar, genius,
devotee.

58

Lord!
A fire is raging
without fuel.
No one can put it out.
I know it spreads from you, enflaming
the whole world.
Even in water
the flames sprout.
Not one but nine streams
are burning. No one
knows any device.
As the city blazes, the watchman
sleeps happily, thinking,
"My house is secure.
Let the town burn, as long as my things
are saved."
Ram, how your colors flicker!
In a hunchback's arms can a man's desires
be fulfilled?
Even as you think of this, you disappear
from birth to birth, your body forever
unsatisfied. No one is so stupid
as one who knows this
and pretends he doesn't.
Kabir asks, what's the way out
for such a fool?

59

Maya 's the super swindler.
Trailing the noose of three qualities,

she wanders, whispering
honeyed words.
For Vishnu she's Lakshmi,
for Shiva she's Shakti,
for priests an idol,
for pilgrims a river.
To a monk she's a nun,
to a king she's a queen,
in one house a jewel,
in one a shell.
For devotees she's a pious lady,
for Brahma, Mrs. Brahma.
Kabir says, seekers,
listen well:
this is a story
no one can tell.

61

When you die, what do you do with your body?
Once the breath stops
you have to put it away.
There are several ways to deal
with spoiled flesh.
Some burn it, some bury it
in the ground.
Hindus prefer cremation,
Turks burial.
But in the end, one way or another,
both have to leave home.
Death spreads the karmic net
like a fisherman snaring fish.
What is a man without Ram?
A dung beetle in the road.
Kabir says, you'll be sorry later
when you go from this house
to that one.

62[1]

Mother, I've poured glory on both families!
I ate twelve husbands at my father's house

and sixteen at the in-laws.
I tied sister-in-law and mother-in-law
to the bed, and insulted
brother-in-law.
I burned the part in the hair of that hag
who nagged me.[2]
In my womb I got five
plus two plus four.
I ate the neighbor lady for breakfast
along with the wise old mother.
Poor thing! Then spreading the easy bed,[3]
I stretched my legs and slept.
Now I don't come, don't go,
don't die or live.
The master has erased all shame.
Seizing the name, I dropped the world.
I caught the name—
so near![4]
I saw the name!
shouts Kabir.

63

Who can I tell?
And who will believe it?
When the bee touches that flower,
he dies.[1]
In the middle of the sky's temple
blooms a flower.
Its petals are down
and its roots are up.
No tilling, sowing or watering,
no shoots or leaves—
just a flower.
Beautifully it blossoms, beautifully
the garland-maker ties her knots.
If it's destroyed
the bee despairs.
Kabir says, listen saints:
the pandits are greedy
for that flower.

65

The yogi's gone away again
to a town of five women
in another country,
no one knows where.
He won't come back to his cave.
His rags are burnt, his flag torn,
his stick snapped, his bowl cracked.
Kabir says, This miserable Kaliyug!
What's in the pot
comes out the spout.[1]

67

If seed is form is god,
then, pandit,
what can you ask?[1]
Where is the intellect? ego? heart?
the three qualities?
Nectar and poison bloom,
fruits ripen,
the Vedas show many ways
to cross the sea.[2]
Kabir says, what do I know
of you or me,
of who gets caught
and who goes free?

69

The musician plays a peerless instrument
with eight sky-mouths thundering.
Only you are played, only you
thunder, your hand alone
runs up and down.
In one sound thirty-six ragas, speaking
an endless word.
The mouths a shaft,[1]
the ear a sounding gourd—
the Satguru made the instrument.

The tongue a string,
the nose a peg—
he rubs on the wax of Maya.
Light bursts in the sky-temple
at a sudden
reversal.
Kabir says, clarity comes
when the musician lives
in your heart.

70[1]

Beast-meat and man-meat are the same,
both have blood that's red, sir.
Men eat beasts, but even jackals
shun a man that's dead, sir.[2]
The potter Brahma shaped the earth;
death, birth—where do things pass, sir?
But you eat animals and fish
as if they grew like grass, sir.[3]
For gods and goddesses of clay
you slaughter a living beast, sir.
If your god's real, why can't he go
to the field and have his feast, sir?
Kabir says, saint, say Ram, Ram,
and Ram and Ram again, sir.
The things men eat to please their tongues
come back to eat the men, sir.[4]

71

Rainbird, to what far place
are you crying?[1]
The world is overflowing
with that water.
The water where sound and sea
divide, where Vedas
and six rites are born,
where dwell
both god and soul,
that water holds earth,

sky and light.
The water from which all bodies spring—
who knows its secret?
Not even Kabir.[2]

72

You go around
bent! bent! bent![1]
Your ten doors are full of hell, you smell
like a fleet of scents,[2]
your cracked eyes don't see the heart,
you haven't an ounce of sense.
Drunk with anger, hunger, sex,
you drown without water.
If you're burnt, the ashes mix with dust;
if you're buried, the maggots eat.
Otherwise you're food for pigs, dogs, crows.
Thus I praise the flesh.
Enchanted madman! You don't see or think—
death isn't far from you.
Try a thousand ways, but still the body
ends up dust.
The fool doesn't have a thought
as he sits in his house of sand.
But without the one Ram, says Kabir,
the cleverest too
are swamped.

73

Puff, puff, puff! Why do you strut?
Have you forgotten how you lay
ten months with your face down?
As the bee circles honey, you buzz
around your money.
When you die they'll cart you away—
nobody likes to keep ghosts around.
A man's wife stays with him to the door,
his friends go a few steps more.
At the corpse-ground there's only

the stretcher. After that, swan,
you're on your own.
Burned, you'll turn to ashes.
Buried, you'll be clay.
Like a raw pot filled with water
your great body
caves in.
Not revelling in Ram, drunk
with delusion, you sink
in time's well.[1]
Kabir says, man, you've trapped yourself
like a parrot on a pole.[2]

74

He's that rascally kind of yogi
who has no sky or earth,
no hand, foot,
form or shape.
Where there's no market
he sets up shop,
weighs things
and keeps the accounts.
No deeds, no creeds,
no yogic powers,
not even a horn or gourd,
so how can he
go begging?

"I know you
and you know me
and I'm inside of you."

When there isn't a trace
of creation or destruction,
what do you meditate on?
That yogi built a house
brimful of Ram.
He has no healing herbs,
his root-of-life
is Ram.[1]

He looks and looks
at the juggler's tricks,
the magician's sleight-of-hand—
Kabir says, saints, he's made it
to the King's land.[2]

75

It's a heavy confusion.
Veda, Koran, holiness, hell, woman, man,
a clay pot shot with air and sperm . . .
When the pot falls apart, what do you call it?
Numskull! You've missed the point.
It's all one skin and bone, one piss and shit,
one blood, one meat.
From one drop, a universe.
Who's Brahmin? Who's Shudra?
Brahma *rajas*, Shiva *tamas*, Vishnu *sattva* . . .
Kabir says, plunge into Ram!
There: No Hindu. No Turk.

76

The self forgets itself
as a frantic dog in a glass temple
barks himself to death;
as a lion, seeing a form in the well,
leaps on the image;
as a rutting elephant sticks his tusk
in a crystal boulder.
The monkey has his fistful of sweets
and won't let go. So
from house to house
he gibbers.[1]
Kabir says, parrot-on-a-pole:
who has caught you?[2]

77

Many hoped
but no one found

68

Hari's heart.
Where do the senses rest?
Where do the Ram-chanters go?
Where do the bright ones go?
Corpses: all gone
to the same place.
Drunk on the juice
of Ram's bliss,[1]
Kabir says,
I've said and I've said.
I'm tired of saying.

78

Now I've understood
Hari's magic play.
Beating his drum he rolls out the show
then gathers it in again.
The Great Hari dupes gods, men and sages.
When he brings out the sorceress Maya
she baffles everyone in the house,
truth can't enter a single heart.
The magic is false,
the magician true—
to the wise it's clear.
Kabir says, what you understand
is what you are.[1]

80

Make your own decision.
See for yourself while you live.
Find your own place.
Dead, what house will you have?
Creature, you don't see
your opportunity.
In the end no one belongs to you.
Kabir says, it's difficult,
this wheel of time.

83

They're morons and mindless fools
who don't know Ram in every breath.
You rampage in, knock down a cow,
cut her throat and take her life.
You turn a living soul to a corpse
and call it a holy rite.[1]
You say the meat is pure, brother?
How was it born? Listen:
Meat is made of blood and sperm,
that's your unholy dinner.
Fool! You say, "It's not our sin,
but our forefathers' preaching."
The blood they shed is on your head
who taught you such a teaching.
The hair is white that once was black
but the heart's as black as before.
Why chant and shout, why pray
till you drop dead at the mosque door?[2]
Pandits read Puranas, Vedas,
Mullas learn Muhammed's faith.
Kabir says, both go straight to hell
if they don't know Ram in every breath.

84

Qazi, what book are you lecturing on?[1]
Yak yak yak, day and night.
You never had an original thought.
Feeling your power, you circumcise—
I can't go along with that, brother.
If your God favored circumcision,
why didn't you come out cut?
If circumcision makes you a Muslim,
what do you call your women?
Since women are called man's other half,
you might as well be Hindus.
If putting on the thread makes you Brahmin,
what does the wife put on?
That Shudra's touching your food, pandit!

How can you eat it?[2]
Hindu, Muslim—where did they come from?
Who started this road?
Look hard in your heart, send out scouts:
where is heaven?
Now you get your way by force,
but when it's time for dying,
without Ram's refuge, says Kabir,
brother, you'll go out crying.[3]

87

Kabir, in your forest of desire
the mind goes hunting.[1]
Garden of the body, deer of bliss:
ready—aim—fire.
The king's alert in his hut
of breath. He easily ties
the root.[2] Grasping the bow
of knowledge, the arrow
of attention, the yogi
shoots. He pierces
the six circles, pierces
the lotuses.
Light bursts.
He chases out rage, lust,
drunkenness, greed,
like wild beasts.[3]
He halts at the door
in the middle of the sky
where there's no day or night.
Kabir's arrived:
no comrades, no
friends.

88

It's not a wild beast, brother,
not a wild beast,[1]
but everyone eats
the meat.

The beast is a whole world—
unimaginable![2]
Tear open the belly,
no liver or guts.
It's this kind of meat, brother:
every minute sold.
Bones and hooves on the dump—
fire and smoke
won't eat it.
No head, no horn,
and where's a tail?
All the pandits meet
and fight.
Kabir sings a marriage song.[3]

89

Lucky one! Why waste this precious life
through greed?
In the field of former lives you sowed
the seed.
From a drop to a shape, you stayed in the pool
of fire;
Ten months in your mother, then again seized by
desire.[1]
Again youth, again old age, what had to pass
has passed.
Yama ties you and takes you away. The tears
flow fast.
Don't hope for life, time owns your breath—Kabir's
advice:
It's a gambler's world. Before you throw the dice,
think twice.

90

Saints and Reverences, recollect:
who slips through time's noose?
Datta, lost in false tastes,
couldn't find the heart.[1]
Like butter churned from water—

that was his meditation.
Gorakh couldn't keep his breath
though he knew some yogic tricks.[2]
Power, profit, control—yes,
but he couldn't go beyond.
Vasishtha knew so much
even Ram, who's called creator,
sat at his feet; but time
wouldn't let him go.[3]
Hindus say, "Burn my body,"
Turks say, "Follow my Pir."[4]
They fight religious wars.
The swan discerns, says Kabir.

92

Recognize the mind, my brother:
when the body drops,
where is the mind?[1]
Sanaka, Sanandana, Jaydev, Nama[2]—
devotees, yes,
but they didn't know the mind.
Ambarishi, Prahlada, Sudama,
with all their devotion
didn't know the mind.
Bhartrihari, Gorakha, Gopichanda,
visited and enjoyed the mind.
In a mind whose secret no one knows
Shukdev was absorbed.
Shiva, Shesha, Narada, Brahma's sons
inside the body
couldn't glimpse the mind.

In all bodies, one
without stain.[3]
There Kabir wanders,
there Kabir stays.

94

What will you call the Pure?[1]
Say, creature: how will you mutter the name

of one without hand or foot,
mouth, tongue or ear?
The light called light-within-light,[2]
what is its sign?
When light-within-light is killed by light,
where has it gone?
They say Brahma
made the Veda,
but he couldn't get
this state.
Kabir says, seekers, sages, scholars,
listen and penetrate.

95[1]

Who will be sheriff
in a town littered with meat
where the watchman
is a vulture?
Mouse in the boat,
cat at the oars;
frog sleeping,
snake on guard;
bull giving birth,
cow sterile,
calf milked
morning, noon and night;
lion forever leaping
to fight the jackal.
Kabir says, rare listeners
hear the song right.

97

The creatures are like you, Allah-Ram.
Lord be kind to them.

Why bump that shaven head on the earth,
why dunk those bones in the water?
Parading as a holy man,
you hide yourself, and slaughter.

74

Why wash your hands and mouth, why chant
with a heart full of fraud?
Why bow and bow in the mosque, and trudge
to Mecca to see God?
Twenty-four days for the Hindus,
thirty days for the Turks—
a month each year for fasting,
eleven for other works.[1]
Does Khuda live in the mosque?
Then who lives everywhere?
Is Ram in idols and holy ground?
Have you looked and found him there?
Hari in the East, Allah in the West—
so you like to dream.
Search in the heart, in the heart alone:
there live Ram and Karim!
Which is false, Koran or Veda?
False is the darkened view.[2]
It's one, one in every body!
How did you make it two?
Every man and woman born,
they're all your forms, says Kabir.
I'm Ram-and-Allah's foolish baby,
he's my guru and pir.[3]

99

Where are you going alone, my friend?
You don't get up, or fuss
about your house.
The body fed on sweets, milk and butter,
the form you adorned
has been tossed out.
The head where you carefully
tied the turban,
that jewel,
the crows are tearing open.
Your stiff bones burn
like a pile of wood,
your hair like a bunch of grass.
No friend comes along, and where

are the elephants you had tied?
You can't taste Maya's juice,
a cat called Death has pounced inside.
Even now you lounge in bed
as Yama's club
falls on your
head.

101

I looked and looked—astonishing!
(Only a rare one hears me sing.)
The earth shot backwards to the sky,
an elephant fell in an ant's eye,[1]
mountains flew without a breeze,
souls and creatures climbed the trees,
in a dry lake the waves lashed,
without water, waterbirds splashed.
Pandits sat and read the law,
babbled of what they never saw.
Who understands Kabir's rhyme
is a true saint to the end of time.

102

Son of a slut!
There. I've insulted you.
Think about getting on the good road.
You don't even dream of meeting
the master of your house.
Brahmin, Kshatriya, Bania[1]
don't listen to what I say.
Yogis and creeping creatures
follow their own way;
and yogis at their leisure
don't withdraw
from pleasure.

103[1]

You simple-minded people!
As water enters water, so Kabir
will meet with dust.

"That Maithili pandit said
you'd die near Magahar.
What a terrible place to be dead![2]
If you want Ram to take you away,
die somewhere else instead.
Besides, they say
whoever dies at Magahar
comes back a donkey."

So much for your faith in Ram.
What's Kashi? Magahar? Barren ground,
when Ram rules in your heart.
If you give up the ghost in Kashi
is there some debt
on the Lord's part?

104[1]

How will you cross, Nath,
how will you cross,
so full of crookedness?
Look how he meditates,
serves and prays.
Look: the white plumage,
the crane's sly ways.[2]
Mood of a snake, look:
utterly lewd,
utterly quarrelsome,
utterly shrewd.
Look: a hawk's
face, and the thoughts
of a cat.
Schools of philosophy
like a cloak furled.
Look: the witch vanity
gulps down the world.

106

The bee has flown, the heron remains.
Night is over,

day is going too.[1]
The young girl quakes and shivers,[2]
not knowing what her lover
will do.
Water won't stay
in unbaked clay.[3]
The swan flutters, the body withers.
Beating at crows, the arm grieves.[4]
Says Kabir, the story sputters
and goes out here.[5]

107

Without your lord
you're an oilman's bullock.[1]
You don't sit with the wise.
Born in the yoke
you die plodding,
driven by Yama's stick
and your own greed.
For the sake of wife, son, house, job, power,
you take this load on your head.
It was you who left your lord
to soak in the senses, you
who sowed the seed of sin.
Spinning out hopes,
false salvations,
you eat the crumbs of ghosts.[2]
Through eighty-four hundred thousand incarnations
the sea rolls.
Kabir says, saints, you're holding on
to a dog's tail.[3]

108

Once again a fish in the water.[1]
In the last life I was drunk
on austerity. Heart detached,
I renounced family,
muttering only
Ram! Ram!

I renounced Banaras,
became a fool.
Lord, where am I now?
Was I a bad servant?
Were you unconscious?
Between the two of us, God,
who's to blame?
I came for your refuge
but couldn't find your feet.
I came to you!
Now the servant Kabir
is truly hopeless.[2]

111

Is there any guru in the world wise enough
to understand the upside-down Veda?
Fire burns in water, blind eyes see.
Cow ate lion, deer ate cheetah,
crow pounced on falcon, quail conquered hawk,
mouse ate cat, dog ate jackal.
He who knows the primal teaching
is dressed right.[1]
One frog ate five snakes.
Kabir shouts:
both together one!

112

This is the big fight, King Ram.
Let anyone settle it who can.[1]
Is Brahma bigger or where he came from?
Is the Veda bigger or where it was born from?
Is the mind bigger or what it believes in?
Is Ram bigger or the knower of Ram?
Kabir turns round, it's hard to see—
is the holy place bigger, or the devotee?

Ramainī

1[1]

The inner light—the word—a woman.
From her Brahma, Vishnu, Tripurari,
from those three endless males and females,
even they don't know
the beginning or end.
The creator made a house
of fourteen stories.[2]
Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva,
great names, settled in
three villages.[3]
They shaped
the parts of the universe,
the six philosophies,
the ninety-six rites.

No one reads Vedas in the womb.
No Turk was born circumcised.
Dropped from the belly at birth,
a man puts on his costumes
and goes through his acts.
On that day you and I had one blood,
and one desire for life
engulfed us.[4]
The world was born from one mother.
What wisdom teaches separation?
When you come from the vagina, you're a child.
When you enjoy the vagina,
they call you a man.
No one knows this ineffable movement—
how could one tongue describe it?
If any man has a million mouths and tongues,
let that great one speak.

Your life—from here
to there! shouts Kabir.[5]
Without Ram's name, the worlds

into dying worlds
disappear.[6]

6

What form or shape to describe?
What second one is there to see?
At first, no Om or Veda—
who can trace his ancestry?[1]
No starry sky,
no moon or sun,
no father's seed,
no calm air,
sea or land—
who can name him
or know his command?
No night or day—
his race and family
who can say?

Remembering the empty, the easy,
a light broke out.
I offer myself to a being
based on nothing.

7

On that day neither air nor water.
On that day creation—who gave birth?
On that day neither womb nor root.
On that day neither knowledge nor Veda,
on that day neither sound nor sorrow,
on that day neither body nor house,
no earthly place, no sky or space.
On that day no teacher, no one to teach,
no difficult path, in or out of reach.

Of the sourceless state, what to say?
No town, nowhere to stay;
seen without a trace;
what do you call that place?

19

They're hoping to hear the unstruck sound—
see the upside-down spectacle!
Just look at the spectacle, brother—
they've taken off for the void.
They want emptiness, go to emptiness,
let go of hands and are left handless.[1]
The world is a beast of doubt.
Death hunts the prey, early and late.

Keep remembering Ram,
Death has you by the hair.
He'll strike at home or in foreign lands,
you never know when or where.

20

Say it: Ram's indestructible name.
If you leave Hari, there's no place to go.
Wherever you go, you're just a moth.
Do you see the trap?[1] Then don't
burn. Get attached
to Ram's name, and learn
how the insect gives its heart
to the bee.[2] The world is heavy
with the load of grief.
Creature, if you can think or see,
make an effort! Your thoughts are useless
waves, you can't see this shore
or the other.

The world: an ocean of desire.
Ram's support: a ship.
Take Hari's refuge: the sea will be
as wide as a calf's hoofprint.

21

So much pain, a mine of pain.
You'll save yourself when you know Ram.

82

The Ram-knowing trick is the only trick
that doesn't land you in a trap.
The world sticks to its own tricks,
it certainly doesn't listen to me.
Gold, silk, horses, women,
a lot of wealth
last a little time.
From a little money
a man goes crazy.
He doesn't hear news
of the King of Death.
When the terror comes,
his face shrivels.
Cheated, he learns
his nectar was poison.

I make, I kill, I burn,
I eat, I fill
the land and water.
Spotless is my name.[1]

23

Joy is small;
grief at the start, grief at the end.[1]
The mind rushes on, a drunk elephant.
Can you forget joy and be free?[2]
You leave truth and run after lies.
Fire and light blaze; you burn
like a moth, pleasing your eyes.
Think: what's the way
to end sorrow?
Break your engagement with lies.
Your birth is guttering out in greed,
old age and death crowd close.

World tied up in confusion,
everything comes and goes.
You got a human birth.
Why are you so deceived?

26

The maker himself became a potter,
the potter shaped all kinds of pots.
He set them in one place, the creator—
carefully he made those pots![1]
He baked them in the belly's fire,
guarding them the whole while.[2]
Then carefully he brought them out
and "Shiva," "Shakti," named them all.[3]
If the son of the house is stupid,
clever ones don't follow him.
I'm telling you my own truth,
madmen follow others' dreams.
Hidden and visible—all one milk.[4]
Who's the Brahmin? Who's the Shudra?
Don't get lost in false pride.
False is the Hindu, false the Turk.

The one who made this picture
is the true artist.[5]
Kabir calls him a good man
who can see this art.

27

Brahma was given the universe,
seven islands, nine-part earth.
Vishnu, firmly fixed in the truth,
was put in charge of three worlds.
Then Shankar with his lingam[1]
nailed earth to the seventh hell.
Next came the eight-limbed lady,
bringing three worlds under her spell.[2]
Her second name was Parvati,
she got Shiva by austerity.
There's just one man, just one woman.
From them the four life-forms,
four castes,
three qualities,
earth and sky.

84

From one egg of Om
the whole cosmos spread.
Kabir says, we're all women to Ram,
the husband, the steady man.

28

No one knows the secret of the weaver
who spread his warp through the universe.
He dug two ditches, sky and earth,[1]
made two spools, sun and moon,[2]
filled his shuttle with a thousand threads,
and weaves till today: a difficult length!
Kabir says, they're joined by actions.
Good threads and bad,
that fellow weaves both.

32

Veda, Purana: a blind man's mirror.
Does the ladle taste the great flavor?
Like a donkey loaded with sandalwood,
a fool can't tell when the smell is good.
Kabir says, they search the sky
but don't find out
how to quell their pride.

33

Brother, the Shastras
are the Vedas' daughters.
Out they came, holding the rope.
Men twined it and bound their own throats
with lying allurements, the noose of death.
Once tied they can't get loose,
the whole world lost in sensual forms.
I see the world stripped by thieves.
Saying Ram, Kabir got free.

Ram! Ram! they yell
till there's a callus on their tongue.

They don't drink clean water
but yearn to dig a well.

34

Read, read, pandit, make yourself clever.
Does that bring freedom?
kindly explain.
Where does the supreme being dwell?
In what village? Pandit, tell
his name. Brahma himself
made the Vedas, but he doesn't know
the secret of freedom.
People babble of alms and merit
but don't hear news
of their own death.
One name—unreachably deep.
Unmoving—the servant Kabir.

Where an ant can't climb,
a mustard seed won't sit,
no going to or from,
the whole world heads for it.

35

The pandit got lost
in Vedic details
but missed the mystery
of his own self.
Worship, prayers,
six sacred activities,
four ages teaching Gayatri,[1]
I ask you: who's got liberty?
You splash yourself
if you touch somebody,[2]
but tell me who
could be lower than you.
Proud of your quality,
great with authority,
such pride never brought anyone good.

86

He whose name is Pride-Breaker—
how will he tolerate pride like yours?

Drop family, drop status,
seek the nonexistent space,[3]
destroy the shoot, destroy the seed,
reach the unembodied place.

36

Wise, subtle, skillful people!
A single cleverness isn't clever.
A double cleverness misses the point
(creation, destruction, day, night).
They've turned it into a retail business—
rules, piety, self-control, God.
A lord like Hari can't be forsaken,
yet children sing songs of weddings in heaven.

Where have the dead men gone
who drank the gurus' tonics?
Know Ram's name to be your own,
throw away unreal things.

37[1]

First cleverness—not clever.
Second cleverness—who can know?
Third cleverness—eats cleverness.
Fourth cleverness—off they go.
Fifth cleverness—no one knows it.
Everyone is ruined in the sixth.
If you know the seventh cleverness, brother,
show it to me in the world
or the Veda.

The *bījak* tells of a treasure,
a treasure that doesn't show.
The word tells of a creature.
Only rare ones know.

45

Hiranyakashipu, Ravana, Kamsa and
Krishna went, gods, men and sages
with all their relations went, King Brahma
missed the whole mystery.
Big folks and clever ones went, and they never
could figure what Ram's story meant.
Was it all milk, or pure water?
More road ahead, but the breath is gone.
With desolation in ten directions
they move on.
The world is a fishnet.
In an iron boat loaded with stone
they row, claiming to know
the secret. Crying, "We float! We float!"
they drown.

Like fish with worm,
mouse with chameleon,
snake with poisonous mole,[1]
each one gives up his soul.[2]

49

Where's his doorway, dervish?
How does the great king dress?
Where does he travel?
Where does he camp?
What's this form
you bow to?
I'm asking you, Mr. Muslim,
with your red and yellow
rags and robes.
Now you, Mr. Qazi,[1]
what kind of work is that,
going from house to house
chopping heads?
Who gave the order for chickens and goats?
Who told you to swing the knife?
Aren't you afraid to be called a sage

as you read your verses
and dupe the world?
Kabir says, this high-class Muslim
wants to force his way on the world.

Fast all day,
kill cows at night,
here prayers, there blood—
does this please God?

51

The one whose name is unsayable, brother,
why sing a ramaini
to him?
The meaning—something like
a traveller on a boat, a
holding and letting go,
moving while sitting.
The body stays
but don't confuse
nature with dress.
Mind still.
Don't talk.

Mind goes without body,
body goes without mind.
Mind and body one:
Kabir says—there's a swan.

78

Culprit, you've missed
your human birth.
Many owners share this body.
Parents say, "Our son!"
and raise him for their profit.
Woman says, "My dear!"
and devours him like a tigress.
Fond wives and loving sons sit,
their mouths gaping like death.

Crows and vultures think
about death, dogs and hogs
eye the road.
Fire says, *I'll burn the body.*
Water says, *I'll quench the flames.*
Earth says, *I'll mingle with it.*
Air says, *I'll blow it away.*
You think that's your home, fool?
It's the enemy at your throat.[1]
Dazed by swarms of sense-forms,
you call the flesh your own.

The body has so many sharers,
born and dying in pain.
Insane, entranced, unthinking man
shouts "Mine!" and "Mine!" again.

Sākhī

5

Between word and word, plenty
of difference.
Churn out the essence-word.
Without the essence-word, says Kabir,
what life do you lead?
Shame![1]

6

Hit by the word, one fell down,
another dropped his kingdom.
Whoever can discern the word,
his work is done.

8

Those who reached this town and didn't
get supplies got caught
in a storm, after dark,
where they couldn't
get supplies.

9

Get supplies right here,
the road ahead is bumpy.
They rush to buy heaven
where there's no salesman
and no shop.

10

If you know you're alive,
find the essence of life.
Life is the sort of guest
you don't meet twice.

12

Why run around offering water?
There's a sea in every house.
If anyone is thirsty,
by hook or crook, he'll drink.

13

Oh swan, the pearls are for sale,
heaped on a golden plate.
If you don't know the secret,
what's to be done for you?

15

Swan, you're strong
but your habits are weak.
You're streaked with dirty colors
and screwing
with various lovers.

18

Why is the doe thin
by the green
pool? One deer,
a hundred thousand
hunters. How to escape
the spear?

19

The three worlds are a cage,
virtue and vice a net.
Every creature is the prey,
and one hunter:
Death.[1]

20

Birth wasted in greed,
virtue gobbled by sin.

My practice went halfway, they say,
and then—my blood.

21

Half a couplet's on its head.
If it's set right,[1]
then pandit, why bawl from the books
day and night?

22

A scarecrow of five elements;
I made a device.
Tell me pandit,
which is bigger:
word or creature?[1]

24

Color is born of color.
I see all colors one.
What color is a living creature?
Solve it if you can.

27

Within the five elements
a secret thing.
A rare one finds the mystery,
the proof, the guru's word.

29

Within the heart a mirror
but no face shows.
You'll see the face when the heart's
doubleness goes.

31

The road the pandits took,
crowds took.

Ram's pass is a high one.
Kabir keeps climbing.

33

Kabir's house is at the top
of a narrow, slippery track.
An ant's foot
won't fit.
So, villain,
why load your bullock?

34

Without seeing that country,
who talks of it is cruel.
He eats rock salt
but peddles camphor.[1]

35

Everyone says words, words.
That word is bodiless.
It won't come
on the tongue.
See it, test it, take it.

38

Snake coiled round the sandal tree.
What can the sandal do?
Every pore choked with poison—
where can nectar go?

40

Take a vow, don't let go,
though tongue and beak are charred.
This is the way the moonbirds
chew hot coals.[1]

42

Flickering, struggling, swaying—
no one is left out.
Gorakh got stuck in Death City.
So who's a yogi?[1]

43

Gorakh was yoga's connoisseur.
They didn't cremate
his body.[1]
Still his meat rotted and mixed
with dust. For nothing
he polished his body.

49

The scent from Malaya Mountain[1]
penetrates many trees.[2]
It never penetrates bamboo
though they touch for centuries.

51

Sun sinks, day fades,
dusk has fallen.
From screwing too many lovers,
the whore is barren.

52

Heart says: when to move?
Mind says: when to leave?
For six months you rack your brain.
The town is half a mile away.[1]

54

Who recognizes Ram's name,
the bars of his cage grow thin.

Sleep doesn't come to his eyes,
meat doesn't jell on his limbs.

58

A gown of love-silk—
put it on, Kabir,
and dance!
They shine with beauty[1]
who speak truth
with mind and body.

59

Into the looking-glass cavern
the dog goes running.
Seeing his own reflection,
he dies barking.

62

The couplet's new, and nobody
can recognize the song.[1]
If you make out the word, you get
a royal parasol.[2]

63

Kabir goes on shouting,
perched on a sandal tree.
I show the road, they don't take it:
what's the loss to me?

64

The best of all true things
is a true heart.
Without truth no happiness,
though you try
a million tricks.

66

They don't listen to wise words
and won't think for themselves.
Kabir continues to scream.
The world goes by like a dream.

67

The fire in the ocean shows no smoke.
Who knows it?
The one who dies burning
and the one who lit it.

69

Drop falling in the ocean—
everyone knows.
Ocean absorbed in the drop—
a rare one knows.

72

Damp with separation, wood
smokes and hisses.
Sorrow ends only when
it burns to ashes.

73

When the arrow of separation hits,
there's no healing.
Sobbing and sobbing, you live dying,
and rise groaning.

74

Kabir's is the true word:
look in your heart and think.
They strain their brains

but don't understand
though I've said it for four ages.

75

If you're a true merchant,
keep a true store.
Sweep the inner floor
and throw the garbage far.

78

Nearby they sink and don't come up;
it makes me wonder.
In illusion's swift stream,
how can you slumber?

79

You say the couplet but don't
grasp it. Your steps
don't make it.
The river rushes on:
where can a foot
be planted?

80

Many sayers, but no
graspers.
Let the sayers flow away
if they won't
grasp.

81

Clear things one at a time,
whatever can be cleared.
Whoever speaks with two mouths
gets slapped hard.

82

Hold your tongue,
avoid loose talk,
stay with the tester.[1]
Remember the word
from the guru's mouth.

83

If a man can't hold
his tongue, his heart's
not true. Don't stay
with him. Along the way,
he'll turn on you.[1]

84

Good words, bad words,
back and forth goes the tongue.
Mind gives a hit:
this way and that.
It's Death behind the swing.

85

Point crammed into the body,
shaft broken.
Without the lodestone it won't come out;
a million other stones
have failed.

86

Ahead the stairway's tiny,
behind it's broken.
Beneath the veil a beauty,
remote, unshaken.

87

The worldling ponders:
domestic life or yoga?
He loses his chances
while others grow conscious.

88

Doubt breaks up the whole world,
no one can break up doubt.
He alone will break doubt
who can make out
the word.

89

It's the kind of speech
no eye can see.
Kabir says, listen
to the word spoken
in every body.

90

Grasp the root: something happens.
Don't be lost
in confusion.
Mind-ocean, mind-born waves—
don't let the tide
sweep you away.

91

In the garden the bee lingers;
so many fragrant flowers there.
In the senses the creature lingers;
finally it goes out in despair.

92

Whirlpool, whirlwind—[1]
unconscious ones drown.

Kabir says, he is saved
whose heart can discern.

95

Monkey and organ-grinder,
creature and mind.
He makes it leap and dance,
he leads it off by the hand.

96

The mind is a nervous thief,
the mind is a pure cheat.
The ruin of sages, men and gods,
the mind has a hundred thousand gates.

97

When the snake of separation
bites the body, mantras
don't work.[1]
Without Ram you can't live.
If you live, you go mad.

98

Without Ram, his body
has no peace.
Don't irritate him.
If you even touch him,
he'll die writhing.

99

The snake of separation enters,
wounds the heart.
Sadhus don't flinch.[1] If he likes it,
let him eat it.

100

A splinter from the tree
of the word
throbs deep
in the vitals.
Pull, but it won't pull out.
Something always
stops it.

102

Death is standing on your head.
Wake up, friend!
With your house in the middle of traffic,
how can you sleep so sound?

103

Wooden structure, black termite,
eating all he can.[1]
Death dwells in the body.
No one understands.

105

Maya and mind are one,
Maya permeates mind.
The three worlds whirl in doubt.
To whom can I explain?

106

Protect the field with a hedge,
the hedge eats up the field.[1]
The three worlds whirl in doubt.
To whom can I explain?

107

Mind-ocean, mind-born waves—
many unconscious ones drown.

102

Kabir says, he is saved
whose heart can discern.

111

Poor man! What to do?
He talks but the door won't open.
Put a dog on the ritual square,
he'll just lick up
the rice-powder there.[1]

112

Poor man! What to do
with his empty body?
Not even a glimpse
of the creature appears.
At whom is Kabir shouting?

113

You get a human birth,
a chance for ambush—
missed.
Fallen in the existence-wheel,
you suffer a rain
of kicks.

114

Try your best with jewels,
decorate the clay.
Kabir came and went again.
Existence is a lie.

115

Human birth is hard to attain,
you don't get a second chance.
Once a ripe fruit falls,
it won't jump back to the branch.

117

The King of couplets crashed:
two letters, four ages.
Just a noise on the tongue.
No one can decode it.[1]

118

A raft of tied-together snakes
in the world-ocean.
Let go, and you'll drown.
Grasp, and they'll bite your arm.

120

If I say one, it isn't so.
If I say two, it's slander.
Kabir has thought about it.
As it is,
so it is.

121

Nectar in a packet
folded again and again.
If you meet someone like yourself,
dissolve it,
give him a drink.

122

Nectar in a bundle,
I took it down from my head.
When I tell them it's one,
they say two-four instead.[1]

123

For whom sages do penance;
whose virtues the Vedas sing

till they're worn out;
that one I'm teaching.
No one believes me.

124

The guru's word is one,
ideas about it endless.
Sages and pandits exhaust themselves,
the Vedas can't touch its limit.

127

Seeing a four-footed beast,
the hunter bolted.
What a marvel, seekers:
a corpse ate Death!

128

The three worlds were robbed,
everyone's everything taken.
The thief didn't have a head
so no one recognized him.

129

Seeing the mill turn
brings tears to the eyes.
No one who falls between the stones
comes out unbroken.

131

Homage to the milk
that yields butter.
In half a couplet of Kabir's
the life
of the four Vedas.

132

Homage to the one
who knows and tests.[1]
The master gave sugar,
the fool saw salt.

135

Plant a tiny grain,
harvest eighty kilos.
Death has pitched his tent.
He walks, night and morning.

136

Plant eighty kilos,
harvest not a grain.
No one hears my words.
In the end, they go out
ruined.

137

Drop yourself;
worship Hari;
head-to-toe let go
of deformity;
don't be afraid
of life;
the essence
of spirituality.

138

With its cliques and caucuses
the world was stupefied.
Be nonpartisan, worship Hari,
join the good and wise.

139

The great went off in their greatness,
ego in every hair.

106

Without knowing the guru
all four castes are untouchable.

140

So what if you dropped illusion?
You didn't drop your pride.
Pride has fooled the best sages,
pride devours all.

141

In Maya's flames the world burns,
burns for gold and sex.
Kabir says, how to save it
when the fire is swathed in cotton?

145

The mind: a mad killer-elephant.
The mind's desires: hawks.
They can't be stopped by chants or charts.[1]
When they like, they swoop and eat.

146

The mind, King Elephant, won't obey—
it goes where its lust leads.
What can the poor driver do
without even a goad in his hand?[1]

147

Maya's a female scavenger,
her husband's a scavenger-man.
She mixes up son and father
and runs from both when she can.

148

Seeing gold and sexy bodies,
don't be dazed by the colors.

Meeting, parting—trivial,
like a skin dropped
by a snake.

151

From holy man you turned to thief,
from thief to social worker.[1]
You'll never know what life is
till the blows come down on you.

152

Why should he feel complete?
The guru never showed the way.
His boat sinks as he tries and tries
to land where there's no quay.

153

He didn't know, he didn't think,
he moved not knowing why.
When a blind man meets a blind man,
who will show the way?

154

When the guru is blind,
what can the student do?
Blind man pushes blind man,
both fall in the well.

155

Don't go rushing
to the public meeting place.[1]
In one field are grazing
lion, cow and ass.

160

Make the guru your burnisher,
polish, polish your mind.[1]

Scour, scour with the word.
Make consciousness a mirror.

161

Your wisdom, when you teach a fool,
drops from sight.[1]
Use up a ton of soap, but coal
won't turn white.

162

Man in his stupid acts—
iron mail from head to toe.
Why bother to raise your bow?
No arrow can pierce that.

163

Parrot on a cottonwool branch,
flies to the parrot tree,[1]
adorns his beak and beats his head.[2]
That's how he has his fun.[3]

164

Quick, parrot, leave the cottonwool tree!
Your wings are falling apart.
He who sleeps in the cottonwool tree
has got no eyes in his heart.[1]

165

Parrot perched on a cottonwool tree
craves a couple of pods.[1]
The pods go POP. The parrot
flies off in despair.

168

Praise the diamond that survives
a rain of blows.

When a phony man is tested
his badness shows.

169

Hari's a diamond, man a jeweler,
the wares are spread in the market.
When the jeweler's heart inclines,
he buys the diamond.

170

Don't display your diamond
in the vegetable stalls.
Tie it in the knot of the natural,[1]
go your own way.

171

A diamond fell in the market,
lay in the trash.
Many busy fools passed by.
A tester took it away.

172

You don't find:
diamonds in storerooms,
sandal trees in rows,
lions in flocks,
holy men in herds.

173

All these people,
very proud of their own heads,
very far from Hari—
they'll never stumble
on knowledge.

174

Bones burn like wood,
hair burns like grass.
Kabir burns in the liquor of Ram
like cotton in a wood house.

176

Why waste your words on a fool?
Why teach control to a brute?
Why shoot your arrows at a rock?
You'll only ruin the point.

178

The two on top are gone,
gone too those of the heart.
Kabir says, he's lost all four.
What way out for him?[1]

179

How many days have passed
craving what's savorless?
Seeds don't sprout in barren ground
though torrents pour from the clouds.

180

I cry for the world,
no one cries for me.
Only he cries for me
who can discern the word.

181

They cry, "Lord! Lord!"
but I have my doubts.
They don't recognize the Lord.
Where can they settle down?

182

Without living beings, beings can't live.
Life is the basis of life.
Be kind to beings, take care of them.
Pandit, think it over.

183

I speak for all
but no one knows me.
It was okay then
and it's okay now.
Ages pass, I stay the same.

184

If I speak out I'm beaten.
When the veil's up, no one sees.
The dog hides under the haystack.
Why talk and make enemies?

185

At home and abroad I wandered,
abundance filled my mind.
But what I really wanted—
of that there was a famine.

186

Kaliyug is bad, the world blind,
nobody hears the word.
When I speak to a man of his own good,
he leaps up, my enemy.

187

I don't touch ink or paper,
this hand never grasped a pen.

112

The greatness of four ages
Kabir tells with his mouth alone.[1]

188

Knowledge in front, knowledge in back,
knowledge right and left.
The knowledge beyond knowledge
is my knowledge.

189

Moving within limits: man.
Moving without limits: saint.
Dropping both limits and no-limits—
unfathomable thought.

191

What can the poor road do?
The travellers don't know where they're going.
Leaving their own path,
they stumble from wasteland to wasteland.

192

You have died and you will die,
the drums of death pound.
Like a dream-lover, the world fades.
One sign remains—a sound.[1]

193

You have died and you will die,
headless and skull-hollow.[1]
Stretched out groaning under a tree,
you'll die today or tomorrow.

194

My speech is of the East,
no one understands me.

They only understand me
who are from the far East.[1]

197

You gathered a ton of milk[1]
and spoiled it with a drop.
The milk split and soured,
the butter was destroyed.

199

Man, here's your greatness:
your meat is useless,
your bones don't make ornaments,
your skin can't be played on an instrument.

200

Who knows me,
I know him.
I don't care what the world
or the Vedas say.

203

When nothing was made,
no earth or water,
no creator or destroyer—
Kabir speaks of *then*.

204

Where speech was: the syllable.[1]
Where the syllable was: a firm mind.
Speech and silence are the same.
A knower is hard to find.

205

As long as the stars glitter
the sun won't rise.

As long as the creatures flicker
in karma, they can't be wise.

206

He doesn't know the village name
and he's forgotten the road.
Tomorrow the thorns will stab him.[1]
Why not take care right now?

207

Keep company with the good—
they drive away disease.
But the vile ones and the fools
drive you crazy night and day.[1]

208

From good company, joy.
From bad company, grief.
Kabir says, go where you can find
company of your own kind.

209

As you stuck to it at first,
stick to it to the last.
Adding a coin, a coin, a coin,[1]
you'll build up a billion.

210

Today, tomorrow, any day
the body isn't stable.
What will you keep inside it?
Water in a raw clay bottle.

211

He's bound by fetters,
the poor creature.

He can get free by his own strength
or the beloved can free him.

212

Don't murder a poor creature,
we all share one breath.
Though you hear a thousand Puranas
you won't get free of that death.[1]

213

Don't murder a poor creature,
he'll pay you back the same.[1]
Make pilgrimage, give a million
jewels to the gods,
but you won't be saved.

214

Three men went on pilgrimage,
jumpy minds and thieving hearts.
Not one sin was taken away;
they piled up nine tons more.

216

Pilgrimage—a poison creeper
climbing from age to age.
Kabir pulled it up by the roots.
Now who's eating poison?[1]

217

Oh virtuous vine,
none can tell your virtue.
From cutting the root you turn green,
from watering you wither.[1]

219

Much thinner than water,
subtler than smoke,

116

swifter than wind,
Kabir's friend.

224

I talk reality, they don't believe me,
these unreal yogis.[1]
Kabir says, listen seekers:
diamond pierces diamond.

225

Gold, a good man, a saint, can break
and mend a hundred times.
A bad man is a clay pot:
Just one blow and—CRACK!

226

The world drowned
in an eye-shadow house.
Homage to the one
who can get in and out.

227

Eye-shadow house,
eye-shadow fort.
Your belly button won't get black
if you cover it up.

229

They've taken all the fish
to sell in the fishers' court.
Your eyes are bloodshot.
Why did you get enmeshed?[1]

231

If you're a fish you can't escape:
the fisherman is your death.

Whatever puddle you paddle in,
there you'll meet the net.

232

Noose on the neck without rope,
invisible noose.
Put a mirror in his hand—
without eyes, what will he see?

233

Explain, but he won't understand;
he's sold to another's hand.
I'm pulling him toward me,
he's rushing to Death City.

234

Entering, entering the forge,
iron's rust
scatters.[1]
Mingling, mingling with the good,[2]
delusion's trance
shatters.

235

In an iron boat
loaded with stones,
a bundle of poison on his head,
he wants to cross over.

236

Krishna's pals the Pandavas
melted in the Himalayas.[1]
If iron has touched the touchstone,
can rust still eat it?[2]

238

The mind dwells in front of the eyes
and runs with every blink.
In the three worlds mind is king.
Everyone worships mind.

239

The mind, greedy for its own juice,
splashes in sensual waves.
Mind drives, body rides—
thus everything runs away.

240

What's the world like?
A flock of sheep.
One falls in the ditch,
the rest jump in.

241

That road is difficult,
no one should go there.
Once gone there's no returning.
Who ever brought back news?

245

The madman without a guru
blindly rushes around,
douses the fire on the garbage heap
and burns his own house down.

247

Listen to everyone,
keep your own counsel.
The powder-box holds powder
and has its own cover.[1]

249

He sings and says but can't understand
the unknown couplet.
Without touching the touchstone, he's like
iron locked in rock.

251

Kabir, they've spoiled devotion,
bathing stones and pebbles.[1]
The poison's stored inside,
the nectar's poured away.

252

She belonged to one, then to many:
a whore has plenty of husbands.
Kabir says, who'll she burn with,
everyone's woman?[1]

253

The body's a ship, the mind's a crow
that flies a million miles.
Sometimes it roams on the boundless sea,
sometimes it shoots to the sky.

256

Throw out unworthy thoughts,
make the best of your birth.
Give up the gait of a crow,
come to me like a swan.

257

As he says, so he does; unties
attraction and aversion;
doesn't shrink or stretch

by a speck inside.
Can you be like him?

259

Delusion filled three worlds,
delusion everywhere.
Kabir says (and he's thought about it),
you live in Delusion Village.

260

You shoved a jewel under the sand
and nibbled gravel.
Kabir shouts: you got a body
and there you go!

261

In the forest how many leaves?
In the Ganga how many grains?
The pandits racked their brains.
From Kabir's mouth one word came.[1]

262

Thinking you were of the swan's race,
I sought your company.
If I'd known you were a crazy crane,
I wouldn't have let you touch me.[1]

263

A person of quality seizes quality.
One of no quality hates quality.
Give nutmeg to a bullock.
Will he understand? Will he eat?

265

Who speak sweet words from the mouth
and keep something else in the heart—

Kabir says, Ram is even cleverer
than those people.

Everyone went from here
with loads and loads piled on.
Nobody came from there.
Run and try to ask.

267

Ram's love is dear
as a fire is dear.
It burns down the whole town,
still they beg for more.

269

Good men became bad men
listening to every man's talk.
Bronze turned to copper,
worth less than a penny.[1]

270

The lonely woman waves wicks[1]—
Let me see you, Ram!
If you show up after I die,
what's the use?

271

In a moment, apocalypse—
heads whirl.
Afraid of the future,[1]
they howl at the past.

272

One entered all,
all entered that.

122

Kabir entered knowledge.
No duality.

273

Do one thing completely, all is done;
try to do all, you lose the one.
To get your fill of flowers and fruit,
water the root.

274

In the wood where lions
don't tread
and birds don't fly,
Kabir ranges[1]
in empty meditation.

276

Speech is priceless
if you speak with knowledge.
Weigh it in the heart's balance
before it comes from the mouth.

277

Use the strength of your own arm,
stop putting hope in others.
When the river flows through your own yard,
how can you die of thirst?

278

So *he's* like that;
don't *you* be a fool.
This much relative,
that much absolute—
knead them into one thought.

279

Drunk-with-Ram means totally
absorbed in the mind.
Mirror-image of a beauty:
though you grab, she won't come to your arms.

280

So you want to be a monk?
Don't play until you're ripe.
If you crush half-grown mustard seeds,
you get neither oil nor pulp.

281

Into a lion's coat
rushes a goat.
You'll recognize him by his voice:
the word reveals.

283

A cage with ten doors,
a bird of air.
The wonder is that it's there;
no wonder if it goes.[1]

287

Burning sand
in the body.
Everyone lives
in sorrow's shadow.

289

Where buyers swarm, I'm not;
where I am, there's no buyer.
Without awareness they wander,

plucking at shadows
of the word.

290

Jewels and stones fill the world;
a rare one tests them.
The tester is greater than the jewel—
so very rare!

291

A dreamer wakes from sleep,
opens his eyes and sees
the creatures are looting each other
and nothing is lost or gained.

293

While there's a drum there's a beat,
there's business in the bazaar.
When the drum cracks, business stops.
No one looks in at your door.[1]

296

Until there's heart-on-heart,[1]
no happiness.
I've shouted for four ages:
the true form's in your heart.

297

I heard the instrument playing,
then all the strings snapped.
What can the poor instrument do?
The player's gone away.

299

You're a holy man? What are you
if you gab without thinking,

if you stab other beings
with the sword of your tongue?

301

A sweet word is a healing herb,
a bitter word is an arrow.
Entering by the door of the ear
it tears through the whole body.

302

See the diver's courage:[1]
plunges in cold depths,
rushes past obstacles,
brings back the pearl.[2]

303

This world is completely befooled,
they're missing both yoga and pleasure.
Kabir threshes sesame seeds,
the people thresh chaff.

306

Fire in the ocean: ashes flake
and break away. Kabir,
how they scream and weep:
It's burned, my precious jewel!

308

If you're true, a curse can't reach you
and death can't eat you.
Walking from truth to truth,
what can destroy you?

310

Go home, doctor.
No one's asking you.

The one who put on this burden
will have to take care of it.

311

Teaching and preaching, their mouths
filled up with sand.
While they watched the fields of others,
their own crops were eaten.

312

I'm watching you,
you're watching him.
Kabir says, how to work it out—
I—he—you?

313

Squinting, staring, peering,
he couldn't hit the mark.
All his arrows missed.
He threw down his bow
and stomped off.

315

He says his, listens to mine;
having listened, makes both one.
I've watched the whole world go by,
but haven't found such a one.

316

I wandered at home and abroad,
through alleys, from village to village,
but I never met a fellow
who could winnow,
who could winnow.

317

I'm looking at you, you're looking
somewhere else.
Damn the kind of mind
that's in two places at once.

318

The magnet loves iron:
it takes iron and uplifts it.
Kabir's word is like that:
it takes you from death and frees you.

319

Lost? So you were lost.
Wake up now.
With the knife of the word
pare away doubt.

320

Kabir recites couplets
every day right on time.
The dead do not come back,
no, they do not turn around.

321

What can the poor guru do
if the student's a lout?
Teach until you're blue,
you're blowing through bamboo.

323

Smallness is best,
from the small comes all.
Everyone bows down
to the second-day moon.

324

Dying, dying, the world keeps dying,
but none knows how to die.
No one dies in such a way
that he won't die again.

326

No customers for the word:
the price is high.
Without paying you can't get it,
so move on by.

328

Lion alone in the forest,
every second running.
As his forest is,
so are all the others.

329

Entered in the body,
sitting there aware.
What state do you want?
Thus insight is given.

330

On this riverbank saints or thieves?
You'll know as soon as they talk.
The character deep within
comes out by the road of the mouth.

331

I didn't meet one heart's intimate:
all were full of their own needs.
Kabir says, the sky is ripped.
Can a tailor mend it?

332

I've seen them all burning,
each in his own fire.
I haven't met anyone
whom I could touch.

333

Makeshift man,
witless, weightless,
a red flower
without fragrance.

337

Straight-up trunk,
unreachable
fruit, a thirsty
bird that tried
hard. The fruit
is sweet, but so
far.

338

The sitting one is a shopkeeper,
the standing one herds cows,
the wakeful one is a watchman.[1]
Death grabbed and ate them all.

339

In front blazing fire,
in back lush green,
gives fruit when you cut the root—
homage to that tree.

340

Birth, death, youth,
and the fourth stage,

old age.
The way cat watches mouse,
Death waits in ambush.

341

Destroyed by others—
why hit what's ruined?[1]
Why wound a wound?
Everywhere, my own breath.

343

They searched and searched, searched some more—
it just kept disappearing.
After all that search, when they couldn't find it,
they gave up and said, "Beyond."

346

Brahma asked his mother,
head bowed, hands joined:
what color is that man?
Mother, please explain.

347

He has no shape or line,
no flesh, no base.[1]
In the middle of the sky-temple,
see the bodiless man.

348

Meditated in the sky,
opened the thunderbolt door,
saw his own reflection.
The three filled with joy.[1]

353

The *sākhī* is wisdom's eye—
look in your heart, understand.
Without the *sākhī* the struggles
of the world will never end.[1]

Appendices

Appendix A: Upside-Down Language

I. THE TRADITION

A man without feet runs everywhere,
without eyes sees the world.

Kabir

Without going out of my door
I can know all things on earth. . . .
The sage . . . arrives without travelling,
sees without looking,
does all without doing.

Lao-tzu

Socrates . . . if you're serious, . . .
won't human life have to be turned
completely upside-down?

Plato[1]

Introduction

A particularly intriguing category of Kabir's poems is the type known as *ulaṭbāṃsī*, poems in "upside-down language." They intrigue because they are absurd, paradoxical, crazy, impenetrable, and yet they purport to be meaningful. Kabir's upside-down poems are part of a long tradition in India and can be related to similar expressions across the world. There are two main routes to understanding their strange symbols and assertions: study of esoteric traditions, and direct intuition. The first route is very complex, and the second is very elusive.

Attempts to explicate this poetry can easily go awry. If you ignore traditional lore, you're a fool. If you approach the material as a scholar, pulling long lists of meanings and equivalences out of your pocket, you're a fool. If you don't have an intimate, immediate understanding of the poem, you have nothing. If you report your personal interpretation, why should anyone believe you? Even in assuming that there is a hidden meaning to be dug out, you may be playing the fool: who is to say you aren't describing a naked emperor's clothes?

Upside-down language *should* make you feel like a fool: that is part of its function.

Sprout without seed, branch without trunk,
fruit without flower, son born
of a sterile womb, climbing a tree
without legs. . . . (*s. 16*)

One appropriate response to poetry of this sort is to be struck dumb. Another is to laugh. S.B. Dasgupta points out that many *ulaṭbāṃsī* poems highlight the ludicrous: a buffalo smoking a pipe, leeches coughing, a jolly woman eating her neighbor for breakfast.[2] Approaches to understanding the poems may include systematic study of symbols, traditions, and sources. But one should maintain one's own "secret" approach that is like the texts: indirect, fragmentary, playful. The investigator should have a touch of Keats's negative capability: "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."[3]

Several types of expression tend to be associated with the term *ulaṭbāṃsī*. There are the obvious paradoxes and upside-down situations: cow drinks milk from calf, son is born of sterile womb, rain falls from earth to sky, wedding guests give out music while instruments dance. There are poems full of animal characters, sometimes in upside-down situations (snake guards frog, fish hunts in the forest, lion swims in the sea), sometimes mainly humorous (the fly shaves his head, the heron gnashes his teeth). There are tangled domestic relationships (incestuous sons and mothers, conspiring in-laws, one bride who becomes a widow during the marriage ceremony, another who ties her mother-in-law to the bed). There are images related to the anatomical system of hatha yoga (sun, moon, lotuses). There are mystic numbers (the cow drinks through nine tubes, is locked in seventy-two rooms, eats four trees with six branches and eighteen leaves).

Expressions similar to Kabir's upside-down language predate him by 3,000 years in Indian religious literature.[4] But it was in the millennium before Kabir that this sort of language became associated with the main movement in Indian religion, generally spoken of under the heading of tantrism.[5] Cryptic and paradoxical expressions abound in the Hindu and Buddhist Tantras, the texts of hatha yoga, the vernacular poetry of the Buddhist "siddhas" who lived between the tenth and twelfth centuries.[6] Study of Kabir's *ulaṭbāṃsī* poems can shed light on the whole *sandhābhāṣā* (intentional or hidden language) tradition of medieval India.[7]

It can also illumine the rest of Kabir's work, especially that aspect of his poetry which attempts to say the unsayable, to tell the *akatha kathā*—or untellable story. Paradoxical expression in Kabir is not limited to the obvious *ulaṭbāṃsī* poems. The formula *akatha kathā*, Kabir's most compact little paradox, appears throughout his works. The Word, a key term indicating Kabir's essential practice and experience, is no word and cannot take a form.[8] Riddles and negations are common fare. Kabir repeatedly says, "No one understands me," "Who can believe this?", "A rare one figures it out," or "How amazing!" His teaching weaves in and out of impossible verbal and intellectual situations. *Ulaṭbāṃsī* poems are merely specialists in inconceivables. Intimacy with them will have a pervasive effect on our understanding of all Kabir's poems.

Tools

Every edition of Kabir with commentary offers explanations of the mysterious expressions in his *ulaṭbāṃsī* poems. There are glossaries with "spiritual"

meanings; special appendices for the significance of numbers, yogic terminology, *ulaṭbāṃsī* images, and proper names; and interpretive essays in both Hindi and English, often with lists of terms and definitions.[9]

But when one consults the glossaries and lists, as well as the *ṭīkā*s, or explications of individual poems, one feels that very little has been explained or understood. The definitions often seem arbitrary. One symbol may have several abstract explanations, quite different from each other; one concept may be expressed by several different concrete terms. Are the commentators just confused? How to decide? When our eyes move from poem to *ṭīkā* to glossary, they don't light up. The information seems dead.

This is partly because it *is* dead (at least some of it is dry, derivative pseudo-scholarship), and partly because we don't appreciate how the poetry works and how to use the tools. Several writers have discussed the principles and purposes of *sandhābhāṣā*. By far the most insightful are Mercea Eliade, and more recently, the Norwegian scholar Per Kvaerne. Both agree that the common explanation of *sandhābhāṣā* as a means of preventing noninitiates from understanding secret doctrines is inadequate. Says Eliade:

> The *sandhā-bhāṣā* . . . seeks . . . chiefly to project the yogin into the "paradoxical situation" indispensable to his training. The semantic polyvalence of words finally substitutes ambiguity for the usual system of reference inherent in ordinary language. And this destruction of language contributes, in its way too, towards "breaking" the profane universe and replacing it by a universe of convertible and integrable planes. In general, symbolism brings about a universal "porousness," "opening" beings and things to transobjective meanings. But in tantrism "intentional language" becomes a mental exercise, forms an integral part of *sādhana*. The disciple must constantly experience the mysterious process of homologization and convergence that is at the root of cosmic manifestation, for he himself has now become a microcosm and, by "awakening" them, he must become conscious of all the forces that, on various planes, periodically create and absorb the universes. It is not only to hide the Great Secret from the noninitiate that he is asked to understand *bodicitta* at once as "thought of awakening" and *semen virile*; through language itself (that is, by creation of a new and paradoxical speech replacing the destroyed profane language) the yogin must enter the plane on which semen can be transformed into thought, and vice versa.[10]

Kvaerne cites the opinions of several Western scholars on *sandhābhāṣā*, remarking that with the above passage by Eliade, "we are . . . coming very close to the truth."[11] Agreeing with Eliade that "the ontological status of the *sādhaka* is paradoxical," Kvaerne claims that the Buddhist *caryāgītī* express this fact "in a much more comprehensive and systematic manner than Eliade could have imagined." To demonstrate, he compiles lists of images (grouped according to theme) as they occur in the songs, and gives the interpretations offered in the Sanskrit commentary by Munidatta. He then observes that the same image is often interpreted both as something absolute and as something relative. The metaphor of a tree, for example, is explained in different contexts as body, mind, and *sahaja* or Void. Instead of being dismayed by this apparent confusion, Kvaerne finds therein the key to the tantric songs' purpose and method:

> At first glance it seems strange that the same image should be employed to express that which is phenomenal and relative (the body) as well as the Absolute (Sahaja, etc.). However, I suggest that it is precisely the paradoxical identity of these two ontological opposites which the songs wish to stress; and while a dogmatic statement of this identity would never be convincing, it may be forcefully expressed by means of a symbol.[12]

The choice of the vernacular, he suggests, may be as significant as the choice of images:

> Perhaps it was employed for the same reason that Nairātmā is always represented as an outcast woman and the adept correspondingly as a Śavara, a Kāpālika, etc.: by expressing the highest truth in the lowest terms, by presenting *Sophia* in the form of a whore, that *coincidentia oppositorum* is achieved which alone can express the paradoxical nature of ultimate reality.[13]

The paradoxical expressions of the *sahaja* state are accessible only to the initiated; but the Buddhist *caryā* poets reject the elaborate external rituals of tantrism. Kvaerne makes the splendid suggestion that the songs themselves function as an initiation. In a chapter on the concept of *sahaja*, he explains that the most accurate rendering of the word is "simultaneously-arisen" or "co-emergent," and that *sahaja* is a "paradoxical state of being in which samsara and Nirvana are experienced simultaneously and hence, in so far as they represent duality, are abolished. . . ."[14] It is not proper to say that the songs illustrate or symbolize anything. Rather they constitute an initiation in their "essential structure . . . , [revealing] the nature of the ultimate state through the systematic ambiguity of their imagery." Thus, "*bodhicitta* [thought of enlightenment], the fundamental concept of all Mahayana and tantric Buddhism . . . may be conceived now as the shining white seed or as the restless vital breath, and now as the Absolute consciousness effulgent with the Clear Light."[15]

No term could be better chosen than Eliade's "polyvalence" to express the way meaning works in these poems. The reason glossaries are misleading and seem almost inapplicable to the problem of interpretation is that they suggest a one-to-one relationship between a "mystery" word and its meaning. Even when more than one equivalent is given, we still picture an arrow pointing from symbol to concept, or vice versa. We would do better to imagine the symbol (for example, "ocean") as a charged point or hub connected by spokes of energy to several meanings—"body," "mind," "*saṃsāra*," "clear light"[16]—which are in turn connected by other spokes to other symbols. So instead of a series of straight-arrow equivalences, we have a molecular cluster where the possibilities of meaning are multiple but not infinite, where the structure of relationships is three-dimensional, not flat. We feel depth, space, darkness among the shining points we can identify. We cannot be sure we have seen all the possible relationships emanating from a single point, much less all the relationships in a whole poem, but we can get a feeling for the kind of structure we are moving in. Then we can use the glossaries, not expecting them to make us understand, but moving among them, as we move among the poems, picking up associations, allowing them to collide with each other,

to shine in the dark, to lie dormant, as we gradually become familiar with the worlds they mark. This process can take us a considerable distance in intuitive skill. But finally our understanding will be limited by our experience. The *ulaṭbāṃsī* poems come from a consciousness utterly different from the one in which we think and function and write essays. To understand "no-time," "no subject-object," "no dualistic views," we have to realize it in our own bodies. A Zen master once prefaced his lectures on a series of koans with this disclaimer:

> These talks would serve to stir up waves where there is no wind, to gash a wound in a healthy skin. Even more foolish is one who clings to words and phrases and thus tries to achieve understanding. It is like trying to strike the moon with a stick, or scratching a shoe because there is an itchy spot on the foot. It has nothing to do with the Truth.[17]

Having spoken these crooked words, he proceeded with his lecture. So we proceed with our essay.

The Tantric Background

A Brahmin youth, searching for his guru, approached a woman fashioning arrows in the marketplace. After observing her concentration and meticulous attention to details, he asked if she was a professional arrowsmith. "My dear young man," the woman replied, "the Buddha's meaning can be known through symbols and actions, not through words and books.[18]"

This lady's comment can serve as a motto for the period when Indian religion was dominated by tantrism (roughly A.D. 700–1200).[19] Teachings were dense—crowded with rituals, diagrams, sounds, postures. Language was concrete: *śunya*, the all-encompassing Buddhist description of reality as empty, became *vajra*, the diamond-hard, adamantine. Tantrism brought the sublime conceptions of the Upanishads and the stark ideals of early Buddhism down to earth, making the body the proving ground for theories about reality and liberation. It radically tested the concept of nonduality, insisting that the individual body/mind, far from being a mere obstacle to overcome, was the vehicle and revealer of enlightenment, was enlightenment itself. Hindu and Buddhist doctrine had always proclaimed the oneness of opposites. Tantric teaching incessantly pulled the opposites together—male and female, physical and spiritual, pure and impure—in imagination and in practice. Hindu teachers developed hatha yoga, a minutely detailed literal and symbolic anatomy of the body, and a technique for attaining liberation through physical postures and breathing exercises, often combined with meditation and austerities. Even before the tantric period, the old Buddhist goal of enlightenment as *nirvāṇa*—extinction of individual existence, cessation of the cycle of birth and dying—had been transmuted into the ideal of the bodhisattva who chooses to be reborn again and again until all beings are free. There is no separate liberation, no enlightenment without boundless compassion, said Mahayana Buddhism, and with this became earthbound, endlessly involved in human life and form.

Tantrism was more blunt. *Nirvāṇa* is *saṃsāra*, it said; passion binds, and passion releases. Truth reveals delusion reveals truth reveals delusion. Just turn them inside out and see through them, see them through.

Inside-out, upside-down. Hatha yoga taught that through rigorous physical exercises the normal tendency of the body's energy to flow downward and be depleted could be reversed. The coiled serpent-power at the base of the spine could be drawn upward. A man could, at the moment of sexual excitation, pull in his semen and send it up, against all the laws of nature,[20] through a subtle channel in the backbone, until it struck the thousand-petalled lotus above the head and all distinctions disappeared in a burst of light.[21] *Śakti*, *kuṇḍalinī*, semen, moondrops, liquor—the terms could be literal or symbolic or both. *Nirvāṇa* is *saṃsāra*, meaning is known through symbols and actions, not words and books. Teachings are not just ideas, but things and acts. The body is a map of the universe, full of flowers, gods and goddesses, radiances, echoing syllables, music, and 72,000 passageways.

This tantric-yogic language of concreteness, reversals, apparent obscurity (by which we mean lack of abstraction) is the immediate source of the upside-down language found so frequently in the works of Kabir. In the *Hevajra Tantra* (which dates back at least to the eighth century, and possibly much earlier),[22] the bodhisattva Vajragarbha asks the Lord, "What may be said of that secret language, that great convention of the *yoginīs*, which the *śrāvakas* and others cannot unriddle?"[23]

Promising to explain in full "that secret language, that great language, the conventional signs," the Lord gives a list of code words (like wine, flesh, camphor, sandalwood, corpse, drum) and their meanings, as well as five classes of untouchable women that refer secretly to the five families of Buddhas. He concludes with a stern admonition to initiates to speak of these matters only in *sandhābhāṣā*, or suffer dire consequences:

> He who has been consecrated in Hevajra and does not use this hidden language, will lose the sacramental power, of that there is no doubt. From calamities or thieves, demons, fevers, poisons, he will die, even though he be a buddha, if he does not speak with this secret language. Having gained this knowledge of his own sacramental nature, if he does not use this speech, then the *yoginīs* who spring from the four *pīṭhas* will show their wrath.[24]

The text is full of obscure and enigmatic expressions. Describing ritual dancing and singing as a means to perfection, the Lord says:

> Adorning our limbs with bone-ornaments we place the corpse in position.
> Union takes place at that meeting, for Ḍombī is not there rejected. . . .
> Decorously one sings there; decorously one dances there. The leader is first appointed, and then he should note the scent first of garlic, next of vultures, and then of camphor and sandal-wood.[25]

Elsewhere he gives even more startling instructions, which turn normal Buddhist ethics upside down:

> You should slay living beings.

You should speak lying words.
You should take what is not given.
You should frequent others' wives.[26]

In this case he immediately explains the inner meaning of his shocking precepts. For example, he says that to practice singleness of thought is to slay beings, for thought is life; to vow to save all beings (an impossible task which bodhisattvas nevertheless undertake) is to speak lying words.

One more passage will be cited from the *Hevajra* as seminal to the development of thought and practice that led, in the fifteenth century, to Kabir's upside-down songs: "By passion the world is bound, by passion too it is released, but by the heretical buddhists this practice of reversal is not known."[27] Kabir was no tantric, and he did not recommend passion as a cure for passion. The key word here is "reversal"—Kabir's *ulṭā*.

Yoga

An important source of imagery in all *sandhābhāṣā* or *ulaṭbāṃsī* is the system of subtle physiology corresponding to the practices of hatha yoga. There are many variations, but the themes are the same throughout the Hindu and Buddhist Tantras and the literature of the Nath yogi sect. First there are the chakras, the "circles" or energy centers located between the base of the spine and the top of the skull. Buddhist texts generally posit four, Hindu seven (though other numbers, such as six and eight, also come up). In the literature these circles provide fields for a baroque profusion of imageries varying with the school and the text.[28]

Then there are the *nāḍi*s, variously translated as nerves, veins, or channels. The *nāḍi*s are commonly said to be 72,000 in number (not counting innumerable smaller nerves). Of these, thirty-two are especially important; among the thirty-two, three are supremely important. It is these three that provide the basic source of metaphors for the redirection and transformation of energies in the body in the process of yogic discipline. The middle channel (within the spinal cord) is known chiefly by two names: *suṣumṇā* in the Hindu texts, *avadhūtī* in the Buddhist.[29] The channels to the right and left have many names: *iḍa-piṇgalā*, *lalanā-rasanā*, *ālī-kālī*, *sun-moon*, *gàngā-yamunā*, *grāhya-grāhaka*, *dhamana-camana*, *prajñā-upāya*, and more. Each of these pairs of names has its own resonances, and the imagery of the two sides bodies forth the concept and experience of duality, creation, consciousness (creation being the emergence of a separate entity, consciousness being a sense of self and other). While prescribing ways in which the yogi can control the circulation of vital energy through the two sides (associating inhalation with one side and exhalation with the other), the texts urge that one should abandon the right and the left and bring together the two vital winds (called *prāṇa* and *apāṇa*), or the sun and the moon, or any of the other pairs, in the central channel.[30] This is what yogic arrestation of breath is about.

The constant movement of breath in and out, round and round, circulating between right and left, is what Kabir (along with many others) calls "coming and going"—the restless, transient quality of our lives, of our minds, analo-

gous to the rounds of birth and death. The various terms used for the right and left *nāḍī*s become a medley of analogies for the experience of dualism, which is inseparable from the experience of time. ("Time" assures us that things come before and after; we breathe in, then out, then in; this effect was produced by that cause.) *Ālī* and *kālī* represent the vowels and consonants, or the world of sound. *Grāhya* and *grāhaka* are the "grasped" and the "grasper," or object and subject. (In the vernacular *grāhak* becomes "customer," a word Kabir sometimes uses in his marketplace metaphors.)[31] Sun and moon are day and night: again, time.[32] The pairs of terms can express sequence, or dependence: the moon depends on the sun for its light; the consonants depend on the vowels for their expression; the main river Ganga depends on the tributary Yamuna, which feeds it; the sacrificial fire (*piṇgalā*) depends on the nourishment (*iḍā*) offered to it.[33]

Many medieval texts describing yogic physiology are associated with the Nath Panth, the sect of hatha yogis founded by Gorakhnath, an almost legendary figure who may have lived in the eleventh century or earlier.[34] The *Gorakṣaśataka*, attributed to Gorakhnath, explains in detail the chakras, *nāḍī*s, winds, postures, breathing exercises, cleansings, and other classifications and practices.[35] Yogic practice became popularly known as *ulṭa-sādhana—reversal practice—or ujāna sādhana*—practice of going-against-the-current.[36] A large body of literature grew up around the Nath sect, including songs that are very similar to Kabir's *ulaṭbāṃsī* poems. For example, from the *Gorakhbāṇi*:

> Nath speaks words of nectar:
> Lotus rains, water gets wet,
> The calf is buried, the stake is tied to it,
> The kettledrum hauls while the camel booms,
> the *pipul* tree sits on the crow's branch,
> the cat runs away from the mouse's squeak,
> when the traveler moves the road gets tired,
> the bed lies down on the old lady,
> the dog has sneaked in, the thief is barking,
> the oven is burning inside the wood,
> the bread is eating the cook,
> a lady's on fire, the firepot puts it out,
> the new bride gives birth to her father-in-law,
> the city's water flows into the wells.[37]

Today wandering *jogī*s (or *jugī*s) in the North and Northeast commonly sing *ulaṭbāṃsī* poems, attributed sometimes to Kabir, sometimes to Gorakhnath and others.[38] Dasgupta cites examples of the style springing up in rural Bengal, associated with the Bauls, the Vaishnava Sahajiyas, or with various individual poets.[39] I recorded such songs one day in Chittupur, a village adjacent to Banaras Hindu University. A group of men, accompanied by a drum and a kind of tambourine, sang with tremendous enthusiasm, and apparently could have gone on for many more hours than I was able to stay.[40]

Dr. Hazariprasad Dvivedi has brought together an interesting collection of evidence suggesting that Kabir's ancestors were of a yogi caste of several cen-

turies' standing, which may have converted to Islam as little as a generation before Kabir. Dvivedi believes that the caste was originally formed by *āśrama-bhraṣṭ* or "fallen" yogis and *sanyāsīs*—individuals who had taken vows of celibacy and world-abandonment, probably from Nath gurus, and had subsequently married and returned to the householder life. His conclusions are summarized as follows:

1. The majority of today's weaving castes at some time rejected the superiority of Brahmins.
2. A caste of "fallen" yogi-householders spread throughout northern and eastern India. They were Nath Panthis and earned their living by weaving and spinning, or by begging in the name of Gorakhnath.
3. The god they worshipped was formless, and they had no sympathy with caste hierarchy or Brahmin superiority, and no belief in avatars.
4. In the eyes of the larger Hindu society they were low and untouchable.
5. After the Muslim invasion they gradually became Muslim.
6. In Panjab, Bihar, U.P., and Bengal, some communities converted en masse.
7. Kabirdas was brought up among these newly converted people.[41]

This hypothetical family history would help explain why Islamic religious attitudes and teaching seem to have left virtually no imprint on Kabir, and why, on the other hand, his compositions are full of yogic views, technical language, and literary style.

The Buddhist Caryāgītī and Dohākoṣas

There is a close kinship between Kabir and the Bengali Buddhist *siddha*s of around the tenth century. Like Kabir, they composed *pada*s, or songs, and *doha*s, or couplets, in the vernacular (and as in his case, the language of the *doha*s is more archaic, that of the *pada*s more contemporary). Like Kabir, they attack orthodoxy and panditry across the board—Brahmins, yogis, Jains, tantrics, Theravada Buddhists, Mahayana Buddhists, pilgrimage, bathing, austerities, all complicated and roundabout methods of investigating the truth.[42] Like Kabir, the Bengali Saraha is aware that most of his teaching falls on deaf ears:

> . . . though Saraha speaks these profound and mysterious words,
> the stupid world seems not to understand.[43]

> They don't listen to wise words
> and won't think for themselves.
> Kabir continues to scream,
> the world goes by like a dream.[44]

Like Kabir, the Buddhists tell of a simple, immediate understanding, within all bodies, closer than close, an understanding that comes "like water meeting water."[45] Like him, they move from broad attacks on hypocrites and fools to subtle evocations of experiences that are beyond words, yet suggestible by one who knows the mind intimately and accurately, who knows how much to de-

scribe, then how to question and prod. And like Kabir, they often speak in mysterious language, surreal images, paradoxes.[46]

The basic yogic concepts we have mentioned are easily recognizable in the Buddhist *caryā* songs. The idea of practice as a process of reversal, or going against the current, appears in an allegory of the body as a boat, where the poet concludes: "Following the bank upward against the current, the boat enters the sky."[47] (Sky or sky-circle is a common name for the topmost chakra, the *sahasrāra* or thousand-petalled lotus, penetration of which means full enlightenment.)

There are many references to the right and left (the two *nāḍīs*), and the necessity of avoiding both and going straight up the center:

A river flows in the middle, between Gangā and Yamunā;
the outcaste woman easily ferries across sinking yogis. . . .
Sun and moon are two wheels for raising and lowering the mast;
ignoring the left course and the right, steer on. . . .
Whoever enters a vehicle and doesn't know how to steer
founders on one bank or the other.[48]

Fool, don't dwell on either shore. Don't veer
so much as a hair or a sesame seed from the royal path. . . .
Abandon the right and left paths.[49]

In one song the poet presents himself as a fierce Kapalika yogi roaming in the city of his body.[50] *Ālī* and *kālī* become the bells on his ankles, sun and moon his earrings—meaning he has brought them so fully under control that they are no more than ornaments to him. At the end he says he has killed his mother-in-law, aunt, sister-in-law, and mother. Killing the relatives means destroying relationships to false views.[51] Kabir often talks of killing family members or otherwise wrecking family ties.[52]

The last *caryā* song we will discuss here is an animal allegory:

In the dark night runs the mouse.
The mouse eats nectar.
Yogi, kill that mouse of wind
because of which you can't end
coming and going.
The mouse destroys the world.
It digs holes, that restless mouse,
and kills sprouts.
The mouse is black, no mark or shade,
it climbs to the sky and eats unthreshed grain.
Then stop that mouse,
forever moving mouse,
with the help of the guru's teaching.
When that mouse's movement stops,
says Bhusuku,
your bonds break.[53]

What is the mouse? The poem says directly it is wind, that is, the breath that the yogi learns to control and render motionless. But the language of the poem

(especially *cañcala*, restless) also suggests it is the mind. Do we have to decide which of these interpretations is correct? No, we should rather be led to consider that in some sense the breath *is* the mind, that to still one is to still the other, that mind is *stuff*, pervading the body just like breath. In fact the Sanskrit commentator interprets mouse at once as mind and vital breath. Later he equates the mouse's blackness with time. This may seem to be a mere word-play—black is *kālā*, time is *kāla*. But it also suggests that mind and breath are inseparable from time. "Coming and going" means circulation of air, movement of thoughts, experiences of past and future. All these meanings should begin to overlap in our minds, like a luminous, transparent tissue in the dark.

We can continue to wander, then, through the world that is a "forest of symbols,"[54] like the Kapalika roaming in the city of his body. We may encounter snakes and scorpions blocking the road; a commentator will tell us they are vowels and consonants.[55] In one place we will read, "The lotus blooms at midnight," and the image will continue to blossom, at unexpected moments, in our minds.[56] There will be overgrown gardens with ripening cotton, maize, and millet.[57] We will find an alligator eating tamarind fruit, while nearby a tortoise is milked till the bucket runs over.[58]

A suitable closing comment for this stage of our discussion may be the following lines, derived from earlier Mahayana sutras and incorporated into a *caryā* song:

> [The world is] like a desert mirage, a celestial city, a mirror-reflection, a stone made from water hardened by a whirlwind.
>
> Like a barren woman's son, . . . oil from sand, a rabbit's horns, flowers blooming in the sky.[59]

It may mean that the world is unreal. It may mean that sky-blossoming flowers are real.

2. THE COW IS SUCKING AT THE CALF'S TEAT: KABIR'S UPSIDE-DOWN SONGS

Ulṭa does not exactly mean "upside-down," for that implies a "rightside-up." "Backwards" fails for the same reason. Each suggests a straight line with a secure starting point and a normal direction. The meaning of *ulṭā* is more like "reversed"—not implying which way is normal. Typical *ulaṭbāṃsī* expressions are based on reversals of roles, personalities, laws of nature: rabbit eats lion, quail conquers hawk, arrow strikes hunter, fire burns in water, rain falls from earth to sky. Obviously it is normal for lion to eat rabbit, rain to fall from sky to earth, and so on. But as we begin to ferret out the symbolic meanings of *lion* and *rabbit*, it will no longer be so obvious when the situation is normal and when it is crazy. What may become clear eventually is just the process of reversal, going both ways.[1]

Even the word "reversal" is troublesome if we start thinking of it as a process in time ("first it was this way, then it became that way"). It is a sudden, unexplainable transformation. "Sudden" is still too slow; we could try "instantaneous." Some of the *ulaṭbāṃsī* paradoxes have this sense of immediacy,

with no gap in which to think about how the world changed from normal to crazy ("sprout without seed," "son born of a sterile womb," "song sung without tongue"). What is being transformed (and here we stumble in our discourse) is the very apparatus of thinking. Somehow the instrument is made to measure itself, the eye to see itself, the sword to cut itself.

The initial plan for this study was to compare interpretations, line for line and symbol for symbol, of people from a variety of backgrounds—gurus, scholars, sadhus and villagers—and to add to the comparison interpretations found in published commentaries. This plan proved to be unwieldy. Sometimes I did not understand the explanations. Sometimes I found them to be confused or lacking in insight. The *mahant* (spiritual head) of Kabir Chaura Temple spoke to me with a volume of commentary always open in front of him: it was obvious that the interpretations were not coming from his own experience. Dada Sitaram, a tantric guru, spoke from his own experience—so much so that he interpreted *māṃs* (meat) as *mākī ās* (hope of [reaching] the Great Mother).[2] Dr. Hazariprasad Dvivedi gave me a list of meanings for *ulṭā* words in poems I had selected; but he warned in person, as he does in his book, that a deep and detailed study of Kabir's straightforward works must precede any effort to interpret the *ulaṭbāṃsī* expressions.[3]

A man identified in my notes only as the "Jaunpur baba" gave an interesting explication of ś. 52. When I told him that some people thought the literal meaning of *chāncha* (which he took to be "spray") was "buttermilk," he amiably revised his whole interpretation to accommodate buttermilk, explaining that one should not be too dogmatic in interpreting these poems.

After explaining some of the symbols in ś. 6, Thakur Jaydev Singh cautioned that these explanations were only part of the story: "Perfect clarity is not possible because he goes on making suggestions. This *vyañjanā* has to be dug out. Poets throw out suggestions in such a way as to require the listener's contemplation."[4] He further told me I was making a big mistake if I expected to find the same meaning everywhere for one symbol. "Each sant or school has particular symbols, and you have to dig out the particular meaning. Mystics revelled in searching out meanings which would not be intelligible to ordinary people."

In a line about an elephant tied to an ant's foot, Singh said the ant stood for mind (*mana*). "Where do you find this out?" I asked.

He replied: "By continuous study of Kabir. Seeing how the word is used in this context and that context. You have to know the tradition. You won't find this in any dictionary. An ant is always after something sweet. It creeps and creeps, and takes only what is sweet. The mind is like this, always after pleasure. The elephant is *ātmā*: so huge a creature as an elephant, tied to the foot of an ant! This is the tragedy of human life, that *ātmā*, pure spirit, is tied to the inclinations and dispositions of *mana*, great elephant to little ant."

Singh also described *ulaṭbāṃsī* as "Zen yoga": "There is an impossible problem, and the head monk stands over your head with a sword, saying, 'Figure it out!' Kabir is doing the same with his disciples. It is a kind of yoga."

Listening to the interpretations of various people and reading through glossaries and commentaries convinced me that an exhaustive (and exhausting)

account of many opinions on each poem was not what was needed. I have proceeded on the assumption that there is something simple and fundamental that the *ulaṭbāṃsī* poems are doing; that that "something" is based on an experience; and that the experience is accessible to anyone, without special initiation. In this essay, a particular poem will be considered *ulaṭbāṃsī* if it expresses directly an *ulṭā* experience. I will try to convey in the following pages some notion of what such an experience might be.

Our starting point for discussion of particular poems will be two published commentaries—that of Vichardas (VD), which I find to be most readable and sensible, and that of the Raja of Rewa edition (Rewa), which is oldest. In some cases I discuss each line, detailing the views of commentators. In others I highlight a certain angle of vision that the poem makes possible. In no case will my discussions exhaust the possibilities of meaning in the poem.

As usual, we are working within the irony (some would say absurdity) of subjecting Kabir's verse to the pawing and pinching of the pandits—a *tamāśā* ("comic spectacle") starring ourselves. With each poem, we can construe the meaning as utterly simple; or we can pursue the meaning endlessly, hopping through commentaries, dictionaries, glossaries, recensions, and similar images in different contexts, sometimes enjoying wordplay like elegant wits, sometimes tripping over ourselves like the Three Stooges. As a bon voyage message for this journey, we may turn to Kabir's description of a *tamāśā*:

> They're hoping to hear the unstruck sound:
> see the upside-down spectacle.
> Just look at the spectacle, brother—
> they've taken off for the void![5]

Five Songs[6]

Śabda 55

> Brother, see what comforts man—
> it's an untellable story.
> Lion and tiger are yoked to a plow
> sowing rice in a barren field.
> The wild bear is pulling weeds,
> the billy goat runs the farm.
> The nanny goat married a lion
> while a cow sang wedding songs.
> The dowry was an antelope,
> the bridesmaid was a lizard.
> The crow washed all the laundry
> while the heron gnashed its teeth.
> The fly shaved its head, shouting,
> I must join the marriage party!
> Kabir says, can you
> figure out this
> poetry?
> If so I'll call you
> scholar, genius,
> devotee.

When I asked Dada Sitaram, tantric guru in Varanasi, to explain this poem, a new insight into the function of *ulaṭbāṃsī* was provided—not by what he said about the poem, but by the way he read it. One of his students was there, a layman of the town. Guruji (as everyone called him) first chanted the poem, and as he did so, he and his student started to chuckle. "It's fun!" it suddenly dawned on me, who had been conducting the interview in a grave scholarly tone. I realized that these snapshots of animals in human guises were like a comic strip, and provided the same amusing and ironic slant on human affairs as Porky Pig in a double-breasted suit, or Minnie Mouse with her hands clasped in a romantic swoon. The poet shows his awareness of this irony in the introductory line: "Just look at man's consolation [or comfort/solace/security/source of courage]. It's an untellable story." *Akatha kathā* in this case might be rendered, with an edge of sarcasm, "It's unbelievable." Before thinking at all about the esoteric meanings of the symbols, we laugh at the prospect of a moo-cow singing auspicious songs, a black crow washing clothes, a newly shaven fly rushing off from the barber, shouting like the white rabbit of *Alice in Wonderland*, "Wait for me! I'm joining the marriage procession!" We laugh as children do at a cartoon, and evoking this childlike state of mind may be one way of breaking habitual thought patterns. Surely this is one reason why ordinary villagers enjoy singing *ulaṭbāṃsī* songs: the songs are silly. It's fun to sing that the bread eats the cook or that an ant's urine becomes a river in which the pandit washes his clothes.[7]

It is also clear that making cartoon animals act out the dramas and preoccupations of daily life—marriage, farming, laundry, haircuts—exposes these activities as trivial or ridiculous, and points up the irony of the fact that we actually take consolation, or find our security, in such occupations.

But beyond these meanings, which became available to me simply through watching two Indians read the poem and respond to it nonverbally, the commentators have discussed each image, sketching a metaphysical substructure beneath what they assume to be an allegorical surface.

The Rewa and VD interpretations (almost identical) will be described in full to give an idea of the commentators' methods. Both say that the lion is *jīva* (living being) and the tiger is *mana* (mind), with VD adding that tigers eat lions. The male goat is the false guru, master of Maya (the female goat who turns up as the bride in a later verse). In the farming allegory the male goat is the farmer who hitches up *jīva* and *mana* like a pair of oxen and sets them plowing with the plow of karma in the barren field of *saṃsāra* (the world of desire, birth and death). VD says they sow many seeds of desires and hopes. Rewa says the grains they sow are the teachings of their false gurus. The bear is another false teacher or pandit who maintains the *saṃsāra*-field with his "weeding." Rewa likens the weeding to the way pandits "pull out" meanings that lead the ignorant astray. He underscores his interpretation by resorting to a pun—a common practice in these commentaries. The word for bear (*bhaluiyā* in Rewa, modern *bhālu*) is bent to become *bhulāvanahāra*—one who causes delusion. VD also enjoys a wordplay on the empty or substanceless world (*asāra saṃsāra*).

In the couplet about crow, heron, and fly (which in VD and Rewa precedes the wedding couplet), the crows are again interpreted as false teachers. Indian

crows are in fact big, black, obnoxious birds, whose hunger is insatiable, whose crowing is cacophonous, and who continually swoop down on garbage and do not hesitate to rip the food out of each other's beaks. These dirty, corrupt creatures, say both commentators, try to wash other people's laundry; that is, they promise to purify the ignorant with their soiled teachings. But after such laundering one only becomes a heron—proverbially a false holy man, white on the outside but crafty, greedy, and violent; standing stock still in meditation, but only waiting for a chance to spear a fish. If a *haṃsa* (swan, symbol of the liberated *jīva*) comes near, the heron scares it away by grinding its teeth—an idiomatic expression for getting angry.[8] The fly is a deluded being who desires liberation. All the gurus say, "Come on, I'll shave your head," meaning "I'll initiate you." And off run the shaven flies to join the marriage party, which they think is heading for *mokṣa*. But this marriage is in fact between the *jīva*-lion and Maya, the female goat.

Both *ṭīkās* avail themselves of the same pun in equating the lizard (*goha*) to the senses (*go*). Rewa mentions a Maithili folk saying that the lizard always travels in the bridal palanquin, commenting that the restless *jīva* enveloped by Maya goes on many palanquins, or bodies, with sensuality as its companion.

The poem ends with a typical mischievous challenge to work out the meaning and earn the right to be called a real pandit, a knower, a devotee.

This account of the two most interesting *Bījak* commentaries reveals that the explicators can be quite thoughtful in trying to work out consistent, interlocking explanations of the various figures; that they often use wordplays to assign meanings; and that at least some of the poems loosely labelled *ulaṭbāṃsī* have a strong folk flavor, especially those using anthropomorphized animals. The commentators salt their explanations with local proverbs, and the animals seem to be associated with various folk beliefs and practices. Perhaps more familiarity with village culture would reveal further associations for such animals as the fly or the antelope.[9]

Finally, we can observe that this poem is not at the heart of *ulaṭbāṃsī* expression as I (along with Eliade and Kvaerne) am defining it. It is a poem of symbols or a simple allegory, not a crazy or paradoxical evocation of a state which is by its nature impenetrable to logic. But like most of Kabir's poems, it hints at such a state, particularly in the opening and closing comments: "Brother, see what comforts man. It's an untellable story." If you can see through these ridiculous activities, if you can understand how we seek false consolation and turn ourselves into crows, flies, and lizards, then you may shed your ludicrousness and find out what a true knower knows.

Śabda 88

It's not a wild beast, brother,
not a wild beast,
but everyone eats
the meat.
The beast is a whole world—
unimaginable!
Tear open the belly,

no liver or guts.
It's this kind of meat, brother:
every minute sold.
Bones and hooves on the dump—
fire and smoke
won't eat it.
No head, no horn,
and where's a tail?
All the pandits meet
and fight.
Kabir sings a marriage song.

Here our two commentators have opposite interpretations of the main symbol.

VD interprets the wild beast or *sāvaj* as Maya-and-*mana*, which are false, therefore incapable of being hunted and caught (the *sāvaj* is always connected with hunting). From that starting point he interprets the rest of the poem quite easily, from "no liver or guts" (naturally, since it's an illusory beast) to "no head, horn or tail" (Maya is beginningless and endless).

Rewa says the *sāvaj* is the Word, *śabdabrahma*, ultimate truth. He, too, can explain each line nicely on this premise. Isn't the Word unimaginable? Isn't it beginningless and endless?

The interesting point about this case of opposite interpretations is that they demonstrate some similarity between the principles of ultimate truth (*śabda*) and delusion (Maya). Both seem to exist and are treated by everyone as if they do exist, but are impossible to capture. Both are endlessly sold in the world's marketplaces—VD says Maya's meat is very delicious, Rewa says the false gurus are offering mantras for money on every corner. Both have no beginning or end and are somehow coextensive with "the whole world."

As if anticipating this locking of horns over the question of whether his no-beast beast is Maya or the Word, the poet gives his own commentary at the end:

All the pandits meet and fight.
Kabir sings a marriage song.

Śabda 62

Mother, I've poured glory on both families!
I ate twelve husbands at my father's house
and sixteen at the in-laws.
I tied sister-in-law and mother-in-law
to the bed, and insulted
brother-in-law.
I burned the part in the hair of that hag
who nagged me.
In my womb I got five
plus two plus four.
I ate the neighbor lady for breakfast
along with the wise old mother.
Poor thing! Then spreading the easy bed,

I stretched my legs and slept.
Now I don't come, don't go,
don't die or live.
The master has erased all shame.
Seizing the name, I dropped the world.
I caught the name—
so near!
I saw the name!
shouts Kabir.

Line-by-line explication with detailed references to commentators, instructive at first, soon becomes stale and dulling. Ś. 62 is one of the craziest religious poems ever. If we plow immediately into the commentaries—the humorless transference of mother-in-law, hair-part, neighbor, belly, and bed into a gray parade of abstractions, the abundant differences of opinion as to what is signified by twelve, sixteen, five, four, and two—we can easily kill the poem.

The first point to make about ś. 62 is that it is wildly irreverent, unruly, disruptive, even (if not immediately translated into doctrine) threatening. It might be the *nirguṇa* equivalent to the songs in the Krishna bhakti tradition where the women of the town abandon their husbands and children to go make love in the forest with Krishna. Though men sigh and wax eloquent over the beauty of these songs and their sentiments, none would like to hear that his wife or daughter was having trysts among the vines and creepers with a purported divinity. Similarly, ś. 62 describes liberation, *sahaja samādhi*, an experience all commentators would recommend. But it does so in terms which explode the relationships that hold society together and which make a shambles of propriety. Nothing is sacred, not even *sahaja*, which is imaged as a spread-out bedroll where the lady sleeps with her feet stuck out, and is juxtaposed with *bapure*, an extremely colloquial term that translates roughly as "poor little thing" (it can also mean trivial, petty, inferior, or worthless). The Kabir Chaura *mahant* insisted that *bapure* had some other meaning, though he said he couldn't remember what it was and would have to look it up in a dictionary. I suspect that he was merely troubled by the indecorousness of the word.

It is not necessary in this case to go over the details of the interpretations offered by the commentators. The numbers in particular provide such a welter of possibilities that one could almost put the combinations associated with *five* or *twelve* into a hat and use whichever came to hand. In fact when Dada Sitaram discussed this poem, he seemed to do just that: in the second line, he juggled whatever groupings occurred to him until they added up to twelve or sixteen.[10] The characters in the poem are also subject to various interpretations. But as long as we understand the main movement, it doesn't seem to matter whether we say the mother-in-law is Maya, the nagging woman ignorance, and the neighbor lady desire, or match them up in some other order.

This is one of the few pure enlightenment poems in the *Bījak*. The opening says the speaker has poured light on both families; the families may be seen as the left and right *nāḍī*s, this world and the other world (VD), *jīva* and *brahmā* (Rewa), or any of the many pairs that represent duality. Then the husbands that are eaten, the in-laws that are subdued, the women that are

humiliated or devoured, the "folks" (*jana*) that end up in the speaker's belly, are all interpreted as powers or aspects of the self (Maya, wrong thoughts, the senses, the four elements of consciousness, imagination, etc.) that have been brought under control. The first half of the poem enumerates these conquests. The second half describes the *sahaja* state in images that continue to be comical and undignified (the easy bed, the stretched-out sleeper). No coming or going, no living or dying, clearly identify this state with *sahaja*. The suddenness of the experience, the exuberance of the expression, and the "name" as the means of access complete the story.

Ś. 62 may also be regarded as more an allegory than an example of "pure" *ulaṭbāṃsī* if we try to differentiate the two. But "upside-downness," as I have said, is not just an isolated type in Kabir's poetry. It is a spirit that pervades his whole teaching, and ś. 62 is a magnificent expression of how completely one's life will be upended if one goes where Kabir points. He may use family actors and household props in an amusing way to symbolize something interior, but he is not joking about the breakup of relationships and the smashing of conventions that provide our "security." In ś. 44 he says that to live from age to age, you must drop family, caste and race. And again, in the famous *sākhī* from the Rajasthani tradition he announces:

I've burned my own house down,
the torch is in my hand.
Now I'll burn down the house of anyone
who wants to follow me.[11]

Śabda 95

Who will be sheriff
in a town littered with meat
where the watchman
is a vulture?
Mouse in the boat,
cat at the oars;
frog sleeping,
snake on guard;
bull giving birth,
cow sterile,
calf milked
morning, noon and night;
lion forever leaping
to fight the jackal.
Kabir says, rare listeners
hear the song right.

The commentators have provided a meaning for nearly every word in the poem, but we shall approach it from a particular standpoint, as a statement about the problem of the mind—*mana*. As background, it will be helpful to consider what Kabir means by *mind*.

The mind is a nervous thief,
the mind is a pure cheat.

The ruin of sages, men and gods,
the mind has a hundred thousand gates. *(sā. 96)*

Mind is identified with Maya: complicated, shape-shifting, illusory.

Maya and mind are one,
maya permeates mind.
The three worlds whirl in doubt.
To whom can I explain? *(sā. 105)*

Maya's the super swindler.
Trailing the noose of three qualities,
she wanders, whispering
honeyed words.
For Vishnu she's Lakshmi,
for Shiva she's Shakti,
for priests an idol,
for pilgrims a river. *(ś. 59)*

Delusion is represented in images of crookedness, tangles, nooses, snares, complexity:

You go around bent! bent! bent! *(ś. 72)*

A ton of tangled thread
that won't go straight.
Born and born again,
tangled. *(ś. 85)*

Everywhere he goes he loses himself
in nets within nets. *(ś. 38)*

The doubt that whirls the three worlds in sā. 105 is the knife that cuts deep in ś. 31—a deep split that splays into countless fissures, a spreading mesh of desires, counter-desires, cross-purposes, and coverups. The first duality does the damage, scars the glass where the image of truth might be reflected:

Within the heart a mirror,
but no face shows.
You'll see the face when the heart's
doubleness goes. *(sā. 29)*

Further images of this proliferating doubleness: wavering, twinkling, struggling, swinging; tides, currents, waves; sea, stars; coming and going.

Flickering, struggling, swaying,
no one is left out. *(sā. 42)*

Mind-ocean, mind-born waves.
Don't let the tide sweep you away. *(sā. 90)*

The river rushes on:
where can a foot be planted? *(sā. 79)*

As long as the stars glitter
the sun won't rise. *(sā. 205)*

In many ways Kabir challenges us to find out how to untangle the threads, get free of the nets, stop drowning in the ocean. He himself will be trapped (like a parrot on a pole) if he explains in the ordinary, discursive language of the mind.[12] So he shows upside-downness, impossible reversals. An elephant is tied to an ant's foot, a frog swallows five snakes, sheep devours wolf, prey pursues hunter, a corpse eats death. These all represent a radical overturning of power. Whose power?

In the three worlds mind is king.
Everyone worships mind. *(sā. 238)*

The grasping mind, controller of past and future, the karmic, coming-and-going mind, holds sway over the three worlds of birth and death. But beyond that realm the mind, King Elephant, loses its power.[13] What seemed the great conqueror can now be easily subdued by its most insignificant victim. Sequence collapses: not only between past and future, but also between smaller and larger.

Drop falling in the ocean—
everyone knows.
Ocean absorbed in a drop—
a rare one knows. *(sā. 69)*

The process by which this occurs is not logical, not sequential. I cannot explain it in this paragraph. Kabir cannot explain it in his verse. He can raise the question: "Mouse and cat together—tell me, how can it be?" (r. 12). And he can show the impossibility of answering it by using the ordinary tricks of the mind.

So we arrive at ś. 95, which states, in its oblique way, that the mind cannot solve the problem since the mind *is* the problem. It is like making a vulture the watchman over a meat-strewn city. It is like appointing a snake as protector of frogs. In such a town can we even talk of a sheriff to round up criminals? Who could be sheriff? Kabir shoots the question at us, following it with a rapid-fire series of impossible images, then bringing us up short, before we have had a chance to note how many times our heads have whirled, with a sudden conclusion:

Kabir says, rare listeners
hear the song right.

Śabda 24

Hermit, that yogi is my guru
who can untie this song.
A tree stands without root,

without flower bears fruit,
no leaf, no branch, and eight
sky-mouths thundering.
Dance done without feet,
tune played without hands,
praises sung without tongue,
singer without shape or form—
the true teacher reveals.
Seek the bird's, the fish's path.
Kabir says, both are hard.
I offer myself to an image:
the great being beyond boundaries
and beyond beyond.

The process of studying *ulaṭbāṃsī* poems should make us less and less dependent on the commentators. The particular connection VD makes for "tree," with all its scriptural precedents, may be interesting and even accurate, but it is only one way of talking about the meaning. We should find our own way.

In ś. 24—an especially beautiful and lucid *ulaṭbāṃsī* poem—we concentrate on the experience of piercing through time, or penetrating cause and effect. Karma—popularly understood as a sort of bank account-cum-Mastercharge, where your current balance may be either a credit or a debit (good karma, bad karma)—is actually the principle of cause and effect. The root meaning of karma is activity or doing. The karmic principle could be stated, "You are what you do"; or, in the context of time, "Your actions determine what you become." Actions include thinking and all other functions of the mind. Karma is logical and inexorable. Because you think the way you do, you act the way you do, and your actions reinforce or prove the validity of your thinking. Because you were born you will die, and because you died you will be born.

When you come from the vagina,
you're a child.
When you enjoy the vagina,
they call you a man.
No one knows this ineffable movement—
how could one tongue describe it? *(r. 1)*

Dying, dying, the world keeps dying,
but none knows how to die.
No one dies in such a way
that he won't die again. *(sā. 324)*

This circular motion is the wheel of time that Kabir says is "difficult" (ś. 80). It is the Tibetan wheel of life, always depicted as being gripped in the teeth and claws of death.

There is an experience in which your body (or your mind, or your body/mind, or the world) is a tree without a root. It did not arise from anything. It is not supported by anything. And it will not give rise to anything. Fruit may

appear on this tree, but it is not logical fruit, not preceded by flowers. Casually, as he expresses the experience of this tree, Kabir mentions "eight sky-mouths thundering"—the eight chakras, the inner roaring associated with their opening and illumination.

We have looked before at lines that emphasize the experience of piercing-through-time, or no cause and effect: "branch without trunk," "son born of sterile womb." Normally we think of trunk as cause of branch, flower as prerequisite of fruit, child as developing from egg. Events are locked together in rigid sequences, each stage frozen like a frame of film. But in the no-time experience there is only one frame continually transforming, continually essential, continually new.

In the middle of the sky's temple
blooms a flower.
Its petals are down
and its roots are up.
No tilling, sowing or watering,
no shoots or leaves—
just a flower. *(ś. 63)*

Everything is just itself, not a result of or preparation for something else.

Wherever I look
only this, only this.
The diamond pierced
my ruby heart. *(ś. 7)*

The "one frame" is both dynamic and still—"something like / a traveller on a boat . . . / moving while sitting" (r. 51). It has a center but no boundaries:

At a loom framed by four Vedas,
with a formless shuttle,
Kabir weaves a shawl
with no edge. *(ś. 81)*

In ś. 24, we move from the standing tree to more dynamic images: dancing without feet, playing without hands, singing without tongue. This experience is not static. Even in activity there is no instrumentality—the dance dances, the tune tunes, the song sings. The singer has no shape or form, yet there is singing.[14] You cannot realize this by thinking or by any effort (no instrumentality). Access will be nonlogical, nonkarmic. Often Kabir says the revealer is Ram. Here he says it is the *satguru*.

As you are trying to understand these paradoxical expressions, Kabir gives a hint: look for the tracks of a fish in the water or a bird in the sky. Fish and bird move freely through the surrounding element, at one with their environment even while separate. They leave no trace of their movement. Does this help you to understand? Well, says Kabir, it is hard.

The shawl without edge, the tracks of a bird, a flower never planted, never watered, never breaking through soil, just blooming—Kabir speaks of this state often in metaphor, sometimes with a bare directness:

Of the sourceless state, what to say?
No town, nowhere to stay;
seen without a trace.
What do you call that place? (r. 7)

"What do you call it?" is a favorite question.

What do you call the Pure?
Say, creature, how will you mutter the name
of one without hand or foot,
mouth, tongue or ear? (ś. 94)

When the pot falls apart, what do you call it? (ś. 75)

In r. 6, at the end of a series of negations, he borrows the language of devotional self-sacrifice associated with *saguṇa bhakti (balihārī)* to offer himself to *nirguṇa* or unconditioned being:

Remembering the empty, the easy,
a light broke out.
I offer myself to a being
based on nothing.

This "being" is the impossible equilibrium of the *ulṭā* state, the tree without root, the dance done in stillness.

The conclusion to ś. 24 is similar but even more remarkable in its ability to contain the opposites of formlessness and form.

Aparampāra	*pāra*	*purukhotama*
Beyond boundaries	beyond	supreme being

mūrata kī balihārī
image sacrifice, offering-up

"Boundless" is a cliche: the mind clicks too easily into an idea of "beyond boundaries." So after this apparent ultimate, Kabir startles us with "beyond beyond." Then comes "image"—*mūrat (mūrtī)*, the common Hindi word for a temple image, an idol. The root *mūrt* means concrete, tangible, with form. In an instant Kabir turns this solid image into the boundless, unimaginable *nirguṇa*.

"Wherever You Are Is the Entry Point"[15]

Although *ulṭa* has usually been translated as "upside-down," I have throughout these discussions suggested that, in experience, truth is not just the opposite of delusion; and I have tried to illustrate what Kvaerne calls the "systematic ambiguity" of *ulaṭbāṃsī* imagery. I said that in ś. 95 the images show an overturning of *mana* or mind, which, until such a reversal, rules the three worlds. But the overturning can just as well be that of *ātmā*, the enlightened or liberated self. *Ulaṭbāṃsī* can describe the upside-downness of the "natural"

world (*saṃsāra*), where mind is king; or it can describe the upside-downness of the "natural" (*sahaja*) world where mind is overthrown.

> Hermit, nature has unnatural ways.
> She smiles on a pauper and makes him a king,
> she turns a king to a beggar. (ś. 23)

Of course, words like *until*, *overthrown*, and *liberated* are dualistic. *Ātmā* does not replace *mana* as "number one." There is a change in which the existence of both *ātmā* and *mana* is eradicated. This is experienced as the eradication of mind, because only mind thinks *ātmā* and mind exist. In this experience one discovers that there is no mind, or that all is mind.

The big/little juxtapositions in *ulaṭbāṃsī* (like elephant/ant) can be looked at from either end of the telescope. Thakur Jaydev Singh said the great elephant is *ātmā*, and Dasgupta cites a *caryā* song that compares the "purified mind, exhilarated with supreme bliss, to an elephant in rut . . . revelling in the lotus-pond of Sahaja."[16] But the rutting elephant is also the passion-driven mind out of control (sās. 145, 146, ś. 76). These reversals of meaning occur not only in the contexts of different poems but can be seen in the same poem, by a slight shift in the angle of vision. Furthermore, not only can the elephant be either *ātmā* or *mana*, but *mana* itself can change from the great organ of delusion to the great organ of liberation. In ś. 92 Kabir uses the word *mana* in line after line as the key to enlightenment, the secret of which need only be "recognized."

If you gain *ulṭa* insight, you do not just reverse your viewpoints. In that case you would be stuck with your head in the ground and your feet in the sky, thinking that all the people walking around with their feet on the ground were upside-down. Rather than getting stuck in a so-called opposite point of view, you gain the capacity for turning endlessly. The moment you have a view you turn it upside down. You see that it *is* upside-down. Ant becomes elephant becomes ant. Mind becomes great and tiny and great and tiny. It is not a viewpoint but a new kind of mind.

Kabir is no tantric if we speak of sexual symbolism and associated practices. But if we speak of the principle "*Nirvaṇa* is *saṃsāra*," Kabir teaches it. Wiping out caste distinctions, blasting external ritual, insisting on a truth that is "in every body" and on a realization that is immediate and abrupt, Kabir could be echoing the *Hevajra Tantra*:

> There is no being that is not enlightened, if it but knows its true nature. The denizens of hell, the *pretas* and the animals, gods and men and titans, even the worms upon the dung-heap . . . even *candālas* and other low-caste wretches and those whose minds are set on slaughter . . . are eternally blissful in their true nature. . . . The mind itself is the perfect *buddha*, and no *buddha* is seen elsewhere.[17]

Now we can see in a deeper way why Kabir shines such a glaring light on dishonesty, from the most flagrant public hypocrisy and cruelty to the most private confusion. It is not because he is a social reformer. Kabir dwells on the myriad gross and subtle forms of delusion because what we call truth and

delusion interpenetrate, set each other off, like figure and ground. To understand one is to understand the other. Delusion is access to truth.

"I Made a Device."[18]

We can hardly escape dualistic language. "Interpenetrate" and "access" presuppose "two." How to arrive at the *ulṭā* state, beyond dualistic thinking? Again the question is fundamentally flawed, using a verb like "arrive." How even to frame a question that may give rise to wisdom? What can a deluded being do?

The problem becomes more tenable if we put it this way: what can a being who is not deluded do to help those who think they are? Kabir says he has made a device (*yukti*) and the device is Ram, or the Word.

A scarecrow of five elements.
I made a device.
Tell me, pandit, which is bigger:
word or creature? (*sā.* 22)

So much pain, a mine of pain.
You'll save yourself when you know Ram.
The Ram-knowing trick is the only trick [*yukti*]
that doesn't land you in a trap. (*r.* 21)

Did Kabir practice with the mantra Ram, and did that lead to his awakening? Or was his illumination sudden and unpremeditated? Did he teach others to recite the name of Ram? If we thought that, would we just be turning him into another technique-peddling guru?

There can be no doubt that in some sense Kabir recommended Ram.

Kabir says, saints, say Ram, Ram,
and Ram and Ram again . . . (*ś.* 70)

Kabir says, plunge into Ram! (*ś.* 75)

They're morons and mindless fools
who don't know Ram in every breath. (*ś.* 83)

Babble Ram's name like a cuckoo, says Kabir. (*ś.* 26)

Saying Ram, Kabir got free. (*r.* 33)

A well-known legend about Kabir and the Emperor Sikandar Lodi provides further insight. Hearing of Kabir's great wisdom, the emperor ordered him to write his opinions on law, grammar, and several other topics covered by the scriptures. Kabir called for a thousand carts filled with paper. Among the tens of thousands of pieces of paper, he inserted one on which the name of Ram had been written. Then he sent the whole caravan back to the king.[19]

The message here, as in the lines quoted above, is: drop everything except Ram, the Word. The practice of Ram-*japa* involves repeating the name of

Ram with complete concentration, aloud or inwardly, until one is conscious of nothing else. The key is concentration. Whatever one's practice, it must be done with utter devotion and singleness of purpose or it will never yield its secret. The secret is like the butter concealed in milk, the Word among words. Without it one's life is shot through with deception and delusion (sā. 5).

Time and again Kabir stresses the importance of giving yourself unwaveringly to one thing. Among words you must find the essence-word (*sāra śabda*). You must grasp the root (*mūla*), discover the vital secret (*marama*), look into the heart (*hṛdaya*).[20] If you do one thing completely you will accomplish everything; if you try to do everything you won't even get one thing (sā. 273). There is one state of knowing from which all states are known (sā. 190).

In the tangle and complexity of life the only way to avoid doubleness, more karmic nets, is to meet each thing that comes up with concentration and dedication:

> Clear things one at a time,
> whatever can be cleared.
> Whoever speaks with two mouths
> gets slapped hard. *(sā. 81)*

Or the same idea expressed even more bluntly:

> I'm looking at you, you're looking
> somewhere else.
> Damn the kind of mind
> that's in two places at once. *(sā. 317)*

The whore (sās. 51, 252) is another version of the fickle mind, the mind in two or ten places at once, unable to "stick to it to the last" (sā. 209).

It appears that Kabir's device for concentration—at least the one he offers to those who are still seeking—is the name of Ram. Spiritual technique may be a delusion (you do not know God by reciting mantra, doing meditation, breathing deeply, or anything else), but it can provide access to truth. Kabir chooses a very simple technique. Even then, he knows, one runs the risk of being caught in it, mistaking the procedure for the true experience (ś. 40). But something is needed, some simple, foolish practice to work on, to work through. Interpreting Ram in the barest possible way, we may say that it is not a personal God, certainly not the popularly worshipped incarnation of Vishnu. Ram is a practice, an entryway. Ram is sound, the Word, the borderline or birthplace where, in emptiness, something vibrates. It is the origin of consciousness, the moment of creation, the emergence of the *jīva*.[21]

Ulṭā mind is before creation, before entry into time. Reversing time does not mean making time go backwards, but overturning the *idea* of time.

> When nothing was made
> no earth or water
> no creator or destroyer—
> Kabir speaks of *then*. *(sā. 203)*

In saying "before" we remain timebound. It may be better to say that this experience is at the juncture (*sandha*), revealing what time and creation are.[22]

The Word is also the *pada*, the song. Kvaerne says *ulaṭbāṃsī* poems themselves constitute an initiation. Kabir confirms this, saying over and over, "If you can understand this, you're guru; but a rare one figures it out."

Appendix B: A Note on Meter and Rhyme

Medieval devotional poetry, especially when composed or transmitted orally, is not very strict in meter. This is only natural, since the verses are adapted to many different styles of singing and are passed over long distances. The following descriptions and examples are meant to give readers a sketchy idea of the simple but vivid poetic forms in which Kabir composed. No written description, however, can begin to convey the varieties of life that these verses take on when sung, chanted, or even quoted as aphorisms in conversation.

Kabir's shortest verse form is the two-line *sākhī* or *dohā* (usually translated in four or more short lines). While there are exceptions to this (as to all generalizations about meter in Kabir), the basic line length is twenty-four *mātra* or units, with each line divided into two parts by a caesura. The units are counted according to a system of long and short syllables: two *mātra* for a long syllable and one for a short syllable. The lines always rhyme at the ends (1b and 2b); sometimes they also rhyme in the middle (1a and 2a). For example, sā. 219:

1. (a) *pānī te ati pātala* / (b) *dhūā̃ te ati jhīna*
2. (a) *pavanahu te utāvala* / (b) *dosta kabīra kīnha*

The *ramainī* is usually in a meter called *caupāī*: each line has thirty-two *mātra* and is divided in the middle by a caesura, with sixteen *mātra* on either side. The two *carana* (half-lines) in each line rhyme with each other. There is no rhyming from line to line. For example, r. 7:

tahiyā hota pavana nahī pānī / tahiyā sr̥ṣṭi kauna utapānī /
tahiyā hota kalī nahī phūlā / tahiyā hota garbha nahī mūlā /
tahiyā hota na vidyā vedā / tahiyā hota sabda nahī khedā /

At the end of the lyric in *caupāī* comes a *sākhī*, creating a marked change in meter. In the translations a white space separates the main part of the *ramainī* from the concluding couplet.

The *pada* or *śabda* is metrically the loosest form, since it is the popular song form, most subject to alteration from region to region and from singer to singer, even from performance to performance. The *pada* has a caesura in each line, but the line lengths vary. There are several possible rhyme schemes. Perhaps the most common is a series of rhymed couplets. For example, the beginning of ś. 2:

santo jāgata nīnda na kījai /
kāla na khāya kalpa nahī byāpai / deha jarā nahī chījai /
ulaṭi gaṅga samudrahi sokhai / sasi au sūrahi grāsai /
nava graha māri rogiyā baithe / jala ma bimba prakāsai /

It is easy to see how such couplets could be added, dropped, or exchanged in singing.

Another common scheme is to rhyme the first and second halves of each line. This creates a series of shorter couplets and makes for a more musical effect as the rhymes come more often. Finally, in some poems all the lines have the same rhyme, again enhancing the musical quality. Since the form of the *pada* is not pure, these three patterns may be found mixed together.

In singing *bhajan* (devotional songs), people almost invariably take one half-line as a refrain to be repeated regularly—in general after each rhymed unit. This *ṭeka* ("support") is wonderfully manipulable, adding much musical and emotional color to the song. In written form the poems often begin with a separate half-line (like ś. 2 above). If the composition does not provide a separate *ṭeka*, the singer will take one on his own, usually from the first line.

Following are the transliterated texts of two short *pada*s from the *Bījak*, one rhyming by half-lines, the other using the same rhyme throughout. The first has four lines, the second three-and-a-half. In each case I have provided an interlinear translation of individual words followed by a full literal translation. A more finished translation will be found in the main text.

Śabda 77

innermost
secret,
self hope did(had) many one no heart found Hari of
āpana āsa kiye bahuterā / kāhu na marma pāvala hari kerā /

senses where do(have) rest he/they where went who say Ram
indrī kahā̃ karai visrāma / so kahā gaye je kahate rāma

he/they where went who are clever became corpses that very place entered
so kahā gaye jo hota sayc̄nā / hoya mṛtaka vaha padahi samānā /

juice/
Ram's bliss Ram's essence drunk says Kabir I saying saying tired
rāmānanda rāma rasa māte / kahai kabira hama kahi kahi thāke /

Many hoped for themselves.
No one found the secret of Hari.
Where do the senses rest?
Where did he go who said Ram?
Where did he go who was clever?
They became corpses and went to the same place.
Drunk with Ram's essence, Ram's bliss
(or: Ramananda was drunk with Ram's essence),
Kabir says, I'm tired out saying and saying.

Śabda 80

servant,
man make own decision
bande karale āpu niberā

own (self) living look own place make having died where house your
āpu jīyate lakhu āpu ṭhaura karu / muye kahā̃ ghara terā /

this opportunity not see / realize creature end anyone not yours
yaha ausara nahī cetihau prānī / anta koī nahī terā /

says Kabir listen oh saints difficult time of wheel
kahāi kabīra suno ho santo / kaṭhina kāla kā gherā /

Man, make your own decision.
While alive, look for yourself and make (find) your own place.
When you die, where is your house?
You don't realize this opportunity.
In the end, no one is yours.
Kabir says, listen, saints.
The wheel of time (or Death) is difficult.

Appendix C: Versions and Editions of the Bījak *and Errors in the Hindi Edition*

Sant Ganga Sharan Das Shastri, administrative head of Kabir Chaura Temple in Varanasi, once explained to me what generally happened to old manuscripts that were copied. The copyist would write at the end, *Jo dekha so lekha*—"I wrote what I saw"—and, perhaps adding his name and the date and place of writing, would ceremoniously consign the original to the nearest holy body of water. Mr. Shastri himself, when his biography of Kabir was published in 1978, threw his handwritten manuscript into the Ganga. With such a tradition to look back on, it is not surprising that no one has reported a manuscript of the *Bījak* with a date earlier than 1805 (see below).

The different recensions of the *Bījak* are associated with different branches of the Kabir Panth that split off from their predecessors in the course of the sect's history. P. N. Tivari and and Shukdev Singh, who have done the most detailed textual study so far, agree on three main recensions: (1) a "standard" *Bījak* (abbreviated as *Bī* by Tivari, called the "Danapur group" by Singh), (2) the Fatuha recension (Tivari's *Bifa*), and (3) the Bhagatahi recension (Tivari's *Bibha*). These three differ in total number of poems, in order of sections, and in order within sections. The standard *Bījak* (so called because it is most widely known and used, and is accepted by the important Kabir Chaura Temple) and the Bhagatahi version are farthest apart in content and arrangement; the Fatuha version occupies an intermediate position.[1]

Both Tivari and Singh affirm that the Bhagatahi text represents the oldest and most authentic *Bījak* tradition, although (or perhaps because) it is much less known and propagated than the standard version. It is shorter, having three fewer *śabda*s and fifty-six fewer *sākhī*s. Among the *sākhī*s it lacks are a number that seem to be interpolations reflecting Kabir Panth mythology.[2]

The standard *Bījak* is associated with Kabir Chaura in Uttar Pradesh as well as with many centers east and west of there. The branch headquarters associated with the Fatuha and Bhagatahi recensions are Biddupur (Muzzafurpur District) and Dhanauti (Chhapra District), both in Bihar.[3]

In sectarian stories of the origin of the *Bījak*, one name always comes up: Bhagavan-das or Bhaggoji, said to have been Kabir's disciple and to have recorded the sayings directly from the Satguru's mouth. Sometimes he is given a brother or fellow disciple, Jaggoji, who also had a copy of the original *Bījak*. The two quarrelled and separated, and the reversed order of the first two *ramainī*s indicates the different versions of the scripture. With or without the Jaggoji story attached, the story of Bhaggoji shows him running off to Bihar, clutching the *Bījak* like a jewel not to be shown to everyone, and founding what came to be known as the Bhagatahi branch of the sect.

While denying that Bhagavan-das was contemporaneous with Kabir, Tiyari does credit him with compiling the original *Bījak*. Tivari gives a detailed

account of what is known about Bhagavan-das.[4] His conclusions are summarized here.

Bhagavan-sahab (as he is called in the lineage he founded) founded the Bhagatahi branch of the sect in Bihar, establishing his compilation of Kabir's sayings as its sacred book. His successor moved the group's headquarters to Tirahut, in a Maithili-speaking area, where the *Bījak* underwent further alterations before achieving its final form. Estimating from records of Guru succession, Tivari concludes that Bhagavan-sahab started the Bhagatahi branch between 1600 and 1650; that period would then indicate the earliest possible dates for the compilation of the *Bījak*. He also suggests that further investigation may yield important new evidence of the most authentic *Bījak* tradition:

> We have already mentioned a shorter version of the *Bījak*, of which Shri Uday Shankar has one copy, and in which there are only 248 *sākhīs*, while other versions have as many as 384. My guess is that the original *Bījak* compiled by Bhagavan-sahab must have been even shorter. . . . If a search is carried out in the Kabir temples of Bihar, it is not impossible that some ancient copy of the *Bījak* might be discovered.[5]

Shukdev Singh, in preparing his critical edition, examined manuscripts from a variety of sources. The earliest manuscript he refers to is dated 1805.[6] He gives great importance to a previously unknown and inaccessible manuscript that came to him from a Bhagatahi branch temple in Bihar. This text, lent to him by Sadhu Ramrup Gosvami of Laheji Bhand, Chhapra District, matches word for word the first printed edition of the Bhagatahi recension.[7] According to Singh, it is the oldest and most important *Bījak* manuscript discovered so far, and it is the primary basis for his edition. But the manuscript is apparently not dated. The fact that it is shorter than the other versions does support its claims to greater authenticity, but does not prove anything about its date. When Singh finished his research the manuscript went back to its caretaker in Bihar; there it presumably remains, and may perhaps be sought out again, photographed, and analyzed further. There may also be, as Tivari suggests, other "hidden treasures" in Bihar, awaiting the serious searcher.

Singh refers to a second Bhagatahi manuscript, which he calls Bhagatahi A, and from which he provides footnoted variants to the readings in his main text. Occasionally one of these variant readings has been used for a translation in this book. When that happens, it is indicated in the notes to the translations.

Despite his insistence on the greater authority of the Bhagatahi tradition, Singh still puts the *śabda*s and *sākhī*s of his edition in the "standard" order with parenthetical references to the Bhagatahi numbering. This is perhaps because the hegemony of the popular *Bījak* is so strong that he hesitated to have his edition printed in too unfamiliar a form. It would be useful in the future to have a critical edition that reflects what the scholars have affirmed, and follows the Bhagatahi order.

There are unfortunately a number of printing errors in the Singh edition. I have gone over these with Dr. Singh and provide below a list of those that are relevant to the translations in this book.

Poem	*Line*	*Error*	*Correct form*
ś. 7	3	duhu	dahu
	7	jahā tahā	tahā tahā
ś. 11	2	ghāvai	dhāvai
ś. 14	2	kulīna miskīna	miskīna kulīna
ś. 31	1	kahiyā	kuhiyā
ś. 39	3	caka	yaka
ś. 40	8	nirmala	nirdhana
ś. 45	1	kauna	kau na
	3	bhanumata	hanumata
ś. 53	5	uāti	jāti
ś. 70	4	bāiyā	boiyā
ś. 78	6	mati	gati
ś. 97	8	bhuluka	muluka
	13	mai	bhai
ś. 107	6	jinana	jivana
r. 6	3	banda	binda
r. 7	6	avigāta	avigata
r. 19	3	behāya	behātha
r. 23	1	dukha sukha	sukha dukha
	1	bhaigara	maigara
r. 28	4	phabīra	kabīra
r. 32	3	so jāya	jo jāya
sā. 8	2	bāya	jāya
sā. 106	2	karō	kahō
sā. 111	2	aiyana	aipana
sā. 114	2	phigariyā	phira gayā
sā. 161	2	kāilā	koilā
sā. 194	2	dhūrta	dhūra
sā. 224	1	āstika ho	āsti kaho
sā. 231	2	jabara	ḍābara
sā. 239	1	bikhayala hari	bikhaya lahari
sā. 273	1	sāghiya	sādhiya
sā. 274	2	kabīra na	kabīrana
sā. 321	2	para modhiye	paramodhiye
sā. 323	1	hāya	hoya
sā. 331	2	sovai	sīvai
sā. 333	2	kahalāla	kaha lāla
sā. 338	2	ghari	dhari
sā. 340	2	kota kai	ko takai

Notes

Preface

1. P. N. Tivari, *Kabīr granthāvalī*, 1:98–99.
2. The exception is the large body of Kabir followers headquartered in Damakhera, Madhya Pradesh. They are known as Dharmadasis because of their near deification of Dharamdas, whom they take to be Kabir's chosen successor. Though they claim to hold the *Bījak* in high esteem, their main scripture is the *Anurāg sāgar* (Ocean of Love), a more devotional, mythologized, Hinduized text.
3. The standard Hindi edition of works by Kabir in the *Guru Granth* is *Sant kabīr*, ed. Ramkumar Varma (Allahabad: Sahitya Bhavan, 1966). Charlotte Vaudeville's *Kabīr-vāṇī* includes this Hindi text and corrects a number of errors in the Varma edition. An old and very inadequate translation may be found in M. A. Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1909; reprint Delhi: S. Chand, 1963), vol. 6. The many translations from the *Guru Granth* in Vaudeville's *Kabīr* may be located by consulting her concordances.
4. Varanasi: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1928, with many reprints.
5. Allahabad: Nilabh Prakashan. See Appendix C for a list of printing errors in this edition.
6. *Kabīr*, p. 77.
7. (a) *Kabīr Granthāvalī (Dohā)*, French.
   (b) *Au Cabaret de l'amour*, French.
   (c) *Kabīr*, vol. 1 (vol. 2, forthcoming), English.
   (d) *Kabīr-vāṇī*, English, French and Hindi.
8. Published by the translator, Hamirpur, 1917.
9. These songs, grouped under headings that link them to regional folk-song styles—*kaharā*, *beli*, *birahulī*, *cāncari*, *hindolā*—appear to represent local singing traditions rather than original utterances. A few of them, however, appear as *padas* in the *Guru Granth* and Rajasthani traditions. Grouped with the folk songs are two other types of composition: the *cauntīsā*, an acrostic with a couplet for each letter of the alphabet, versions of which are found in both the *Guru Granth* and Rajasthani traditions; and the *vipramatīsī*, a twenty-eight-line poem attacking Brahmins and Hindu practices, and concluding with a statement of Kabir's views on inner truth and genuine experience.
10. For more information on poetic forms, see Appendix B.
11. Chap. 1 of my "Studies in Kabīr: Texts, Traditions, Styles, and Skills."
12. In *The Sant Tradition of India*.
13. Especially pp. 49–80.
14. Most notable are the long, minutely detailed introduction to P. N. Tivari's *Kabīr Granthāvalī*, and Shukdev Singh's introduction to the *Bījak*. See also chap. 14 of Parashuram Chaturvedi's *Kabīr sāhitya kī parakh*.

Introduction

1. Vaudeville discusses the issue of Kabir's and Ramananda's historical relationship in *Kabīr*, pp. 110–17.
2. For further discussion of "Ram" and its meaning in Kabir, see Appendix A, "I Made a Device," p. 159.
3. Kabir presents these questions in ś. 43, ś. 24, and the poem quoted in n. 34 below.
4. For examples of Kabir's references to being beaten, see śs. 4, 9; sās. 182, 184, 186.
5. These are the dates Vaudeville settles on after discussing the questions surrounding Kabir's biography (*Kabīr*, p. 39). Popular belief is that he lived from 1398 to 1518. For a selection of popular stories about Kabir, see "Life of Kabir in Legend" in Ahmad Shah's translation of the *Bījak*.
6. A recent book title suggests this attitude: Muhammed Hedayetullah, *Kabir: The Apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977).
7. P. N. Tivari, *Kabīr Granthāvalī, sākhī* sect. 5, no. 13, p. 160; translated in Vaudeville, p. 190.
8. The original collector was Kshitimohan Sen, whose best-known work in English is *Medieval Mysticism of India* (Calcutta, 1935). The one hundred songs on which Tagore based his translations may be found in Hindi in Hazariprasad Dvivedi, *Kabīr*, pp. 233–91.
9. Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, p. 58.
10. The Rajasthani collections have generally been called *Granthāvalī* since S. S. Das published his edition in 1928. But the title creates confusion, especially since the 1961 publication of Tivari's *Kabīr granthāvalī*, which is not at all the same collection. Vaudeville skirts the confusion by consistently saying "Rajasthani tradition" (rather than *Granthāvalī*) when comparing those texts to the *Guru Granth* or *Bījak*. In using the title *Pañcvāṇī* ("Words of the Five"), I am harking back to the early name for the collection, which contains the sayings of five saints honored by the followers of Dadu Dayal.
11. See my "Studies in Kabīr," pp. 14–20.
12. See my "Three Kabir Collections," under the subheading "Krishna in Kabīr?"
13. *Au Cabaret de l'amour*, pp. 20–21.
14. P. D. Barthwal, for example, in *The Nirgun School of Hindi Poetry*, accounts for their power by resorting to an awkward separation of form and content: "How earnestly one wishes that these Nirgunis knew and cared for the ordinary rules of grammar and prosody if not of rhetorics [*sic*]. Even a little bit of polish would have immeasurably enhanced the charm of their utterances. . . . It is not only the inadequacy of language, but the total disregard of form that one deplores. . . . But it is not for the beauty of expression that one ought to go to the mystic but for the beauty of the idea expressed. . . . It is in the content and not the form that the real poetry consists" (pp. 222–23). On the terms *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa*, see n. 20 below.
15. For example, Dr. Mahendra, *Kabīr kī bhāṣa* (Delhi, 1969), Part II.
16. Kabir can be called the most translatable except, that is, for problems raised by

archaic, unsystematic language forms and obscure expressions which trouble Indians as well as foreigners.

17. *The Transport of Love* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), introduction.
18. Ibid., p. 2.
19. Ibid., pp. 2–3.
20. Throughout Indian religious history, *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* designate two major modes of conceiving of God or ultimate truth. The former is with attributes, sometimes loosely defined as "having form"; the latter is without attributes or "formless." The *saguṇa* manifestations of God are the familiar deities of Hindu mythology, especially the chief incarnations of Vishnu, Ram and Krishna. They have very particular form, are associated with myriad stories about their deeds on earth, are tied to their devotees by intense emotional attachments modeled on human relationships, and are worshiped concretely—i.e., by ritual, pilgrimage, a variety of observances, and expressions of love that take physical form (such as weeping, dancing, singing, hair standing on end). The *nirguṇa* truth is unmanifest. It is presented as beyond anything that can be expressed or thought of. The *saguṇa* mode tends to be associated with the way of *bhakti*, "devotion," the *nirguṇa* with the way of *jñāna*, "knowledge." The scriptural lineage of the former is traced mainly through the epics and Puranas, that of the latter mainly through the Upanishads, Vedanta, and Tantras.

    In practice, and even in the texts, the two modes do not remain strictly separated; in fact, the dialectic between them is constant and inevitable. But there are marked emphases, and these emphases make important practical and psychological differences. Kabir is the greatest figure in what is now known as the *sant* school: saint-poets and teachers who strongly emphasized the *nirguṇa* way.

    For futher information on the *sant* tradition, see W. H. McLeod, *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh Religion*, pp. 151–58. See also Schomer and McLeod, *The Sant Tradition of India*.
21. On *reader* and *listener*, see Preface.
22. The demonstrative pronoun *that* does not appear in Hindi; but the effect is much the same, as Hindi syntax allows the sentence to begin with *flower*.
23. See Appendix A for an account of the history of *ulaṭbāṃsī* in Indian tradition, and analyses of *ulaṭbāṃsī* poems by Kabir.
24. I refer to Rigveda X:129, sometimes called "Hymn of Creation." There are many translations. For example: A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (London, 1954), pp. 247–48, reprinted in Mercea Eliade, *From Primitives to Zen* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 109–11; *The Upanishads*, trans. Juan Mascaró (Baltimore: Penguin, 1965), pp. 9–10; *Sources of Indian Tradition*, ed. W. T. de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 15–16.
25. There is another level of meaning for *jo aba kī būjhai*—"[the one] who understands now." Since the postposition *ki* cannot stand alone, the feminine noun *bāt* is mentally inserted after it. *Bāt* means matter, point, subject. "If you understand the 'matter of now' " can mean not only, "If you understand what I just said," but also, "If you understand *nowness*."
26. See also ś. 41, n. 1.
27. Socrates, most famous of dialoguists, tends to have the same sort of hammerlock on his conversations. It often seems that his young interlocutors are there only to say, "Certainly, Socrates," "That is beyond doubt," or "It seems impossible to avoid that conclusion."
28. Indian readers will also be aware of the significance of saying eighty-four

hundred thousand vessels: only once in that many lives does the *jīva* (living being) attain human birth, the unique opportunity to become liberated.

29. See śs. 30 and 70.
30. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.
31. Fish, pp. 1–7.
32. Quoted in Fish, p. 20.
33. Fish, pp. 20–21.
34. *Hamlet*, I.5.136–37 in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. W. J. Craig (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), p. 1015. I have Americanized the spelling.
35. Fish, p. 4.
36. Ibid., p. 3.
37. Ibid., p. 39.
38. Another wonderful example of this sort of questioning discourse is in the *Granthāvalī, pada* 164, p. 107 in the Das edition:

> King Ram, I don't know how the unmanifest manifests.
> Tell me how to speak of your form.
> Was the sky first or the earth, lord,
> was the wind first, or the water?
> Was the moon first or the sun, lord?
> Which was first, all-knower?
> Was breath first or body, lord,
> was blood first or semen?
> Was man first or woman, lord,
> was seed first or field?
> Was day first or night, lord,
> was sin first or merit?
> Kabir says, where the pure one dwells,
> is there something there or nothing?

39. See ś. 2, n. 6.
40. Pai-chang (Huai-hai), *Sayings and Doings of Pai-chang*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Los Angeles: Center Publications, 1979), p. 71. I am thankful to Steven Weintraub for this reference.
41. See the story of the arrowsmith in Appendix A, p. 139.
42. In r. 6, *kula bhedā* means family line. But could it mean full mystery? (*Kula* also has two meanings, family and complete.) In ś. 8 *bhakti bheda* is usually understood as "the secret of *bhakti*." But could it mean devotion and separation? On the "sword of knowledge," see ś. 5.
43. Sā. 102.
44. Śs. 61, 72, 99.
45. This was related to me in Varanasi, as a sort of proverb. I cannot cite the source other than the oral tradition.
46. See discussions of śs. 55 and 95 in Appendix A, Part 2.
47. On *saguṇa*, see n. 20 above.
48. Śs. 77, 108, 89; sās. 277, 298.
49. Ś. 55.
50. Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Hakuin: Zen and Art* (New York: Overlook Press, forthcoming).
51. See, for example, śs. 29, 72, 73, 85, 97, 107; sās. 141, 148.
52. In ś. 36 Kabir says the spreading gaze of death is the untellable story. But he is free from fear of this death:

Kabir's heart accepts the thief.
Cheating disappears
when you recognize the cheat.

53. On the idea of karma in the context of one of Kabir's poems, see discussion of ś. 24 in Appendix A, Part 2.
54. Ś. 75.
55. "Gayabanandji" is my best guess at transliteration of the name as I heard it. *Gāyab* in Hindi is an adjective referring to something that has vanished.
56. The poem under discussion is ś. 9, not included in this selection of translations.

Translations
Śabda

2.1 This *śabda* is an example of *ulaṭbāṃsī* or "upside-down language." *Ulṭā*, "reversed," has here been translated as "turned-around." For a detailed discussion of this genre, see Appendix A.

2.2 Dvivedi gives a table of the commentators' "amusing" differences of opinion about the symbols in this poem (*Kabīr*, pp. 103–04).

2.3 Though Ganga and Yamuna generally signify the right and left *nāḍī*s, Per Kvaerne notes that "Ganga alone can also signify the *mahāsukhacakra*" (the chakra of "supreme bliss" at the top of the head). *An Anthology of Buddhist Tantric Songs*, p. 48.

2.4 *Grāsanā*/*grasanā* means to swallow, seize, or make a morsel of. *Gras* means the eclipsed part of the sun or moon. In Indian myth an eclipse occurs when Rahu—a monstrous head without a body—manages to swallow the sun or moon, which it is always chasing in a rage.

2.5 "A pail turned upside down [means] concentrated thought which cannot be diverted by anything." A. Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1975), p. 177.

2.6 SS has *bundanī* here while other eds. have *badanī* or something close to it. SS reads *kathanī* and *bundanī* as standing for *nāda* (primal sound) and *bindu* (primal seed or semen). If the other reading is taken, *kathanī-badanī* would be a coupled word, both members having the same meaning—"word" or "what is said."

2.7 *Ī puruṣa kī bānī*: lit., "This is the utterance of *puruṣa*." *Puruṣa*, besides meaning man in common speech, denotes the cosmic being or God in scriptures going back to the Vedas and Upanishads.

3.1 The five fellows seem to be the five sense organs—eye, ear, nose, skin, and tongue. Their meals, says VD, are form, word, scent, touch, and flavor. Cf. Chandogya Upanishad: The five sense functions "disputed among themselves on self-superiority, saying [in turn]: 'I am superior! I am superior!' . . . went to Father Prajāpati, and said, 'Sir! Which of us is the most superior?' " Ernest Hume, trans., *The Thirteen Principal Upaniṣads*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 227.

3.2 *Dohāga*, f. *dohāgina*, is one marked with bad luck, in contrast to the *suhāgina* or fortunate, happily married woman (Manak).

4.1 This is a simplification of the original, which says *sahajai sahaja samāna*, lit., "Simply one enters the simple," or "The simple entered the simple." *Sahaja* is a term for enlightenment associated first with tantric Buddhism (the Sahajayāna school), later with Hinduism. It is usually translated as simple, spontaneous, natural, or easy; but as Kvaerne explains, it may be most accurately rendered as "co-emergent" or "simultaneously arisen" (*Anthology*, p. 62).

5.1 Shorthand for the round of eighty-four hundred thousand lives through which a being must migrate before it attains a human birth.

5.2 *Nāgapāṃṣa*. A weapon that wraps itself like snakes around its victim.

6.1 The tangle of relationships here is probably not meant to be deciphered systematically, though the commentators have tried. It is perhaps enough to know that

the female is in all cases Maya. Kabir has several poems in which Maya marries everyone in sight or otherwise makes a ruin of family relationships (e.g., śs. 44 and 62; sā. 147). The theme has its precedents in the earliest Indian mythology, where a primal incest accounts for the generation of the universe (see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths* [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975], pp. 25 ff.).

6.2 *Samadhī* refers only to the relationship between the two fathers-in-law, i.e., the fathers of the married couple. This line speaks of the wife's *samadhī*, which is impossible. I have tried to approximate the confusion of the original with "in-laws' in-laws." There could also be a pun on *sama* (clear, even, level) and *dhi* (*buddhi*, intellect), *samadhi* being translatable as "clear understanding." See ś. 54, n. 3.

7.1 *Unamuni/unmanī*. Yogic terms for a state in which mental functions are stilled (*Śabdasāger*).

7.2 The epithet *Raghurāī* (King of Raghus) is used, an unusual occurrence in the *Bījak* where Kabir repudiates the mythological Ram known by such epithets (as in śs. 8 and 109).

7.3 *Tahā tahā soī* could as well be translated, "only he" or "only that."

8.1 The Ten-Avatar theme is conventionally used in *bhakti* poetry to glorify Vishnu or the poet's favorite incarnation (cf. Tulsidas's *Vinayapatrikā*, No. 52). Kabir uses it to debunk the idea of avatars. He runs through the ten principal incarnations of Vishnu—fish, turtle, boar, Narasimha (the man-lion who "burst from a pillar"), Vamana (the dwarf), Parashuram, Ram, Krishna, Buddha, and Kalki (the future avatar whose coming will signify apocalypse), demonstrating again and again his opening statement that "what comes and goes is Maya." On Maya, see Glossary.

8.2 See n. 42 to Introduction.

10.1 On *ekādasī*, the eleventh day of each lunar fortnight, Hindus are supposed to abstain from rice, wheat, and other grains.

10.2 Hindus and Muslims both had their sanctified ways of killing animals. In Hindu *jhatak* the animal is decapitated suddenly; in Muslim *halāl* it is allowed to bleed to death slowly.

10.3 Hindu and Muslim names for God.

11.1 Yama: see Glossary.

11.2 Kaliyug: the last in the cycle of four ages, beginning with Satyug or the Age of Truth, and progressively degenerating until Kaliyug, when evil prevails and it is nearly impossible to know God or practice truth. At the end of Kaliyug comes an apocalyptic dissolution, after which the cycle begins again.

12.1 The drunkenness induced by "love-liquor" is an unusual theme in the *Bījak*, although common in other *bhakti* poetry. Here the poet catalogues famous devotees from the epics, Puranas, and other sources of legend.

12.2 SS has *satarangī* (seven colors) while other eds. have *satasangī* (good or holy company). With the latter reading the line would mean, "got drunk with their holy companions."

12.3 Lit., "They cut off the dirt/impurity of *karma*."

12.4 Other eds. have *Śiva kī nārī* (Shiva's woman) instead of *Sevarī-nārī*. The latter is a character in the Tulsidas *Rāmāyaṇa*, an untouchable tribal woman who served Ram plums after tasting them herself to see if they were good enough. This was a gross violation of Hindu rules of purity, but she was forgiven because of her pure devotion.

14.1 *Saṃśaya* or "doubt," found frequently in Kabir (e.g., ś. 31), refers to a fundamental confusion or duality. Cf. Mundaka Upanishad:

> The knot of the heart is loosened,
> All doubts are cut off,
> And one's deeds (*karman*) cease
> When He is seen. . . .
> (*Upaniṣhads*, trans. Hume, p. 373).

14.2 Lit., "You yogis and *sanyāsīs*, having become low (*miskīna*), still call yourselves high-born (*kulīna*, of noble lineage)." *Kulīna* and *miskīna* have been mistakenly transposed in SS ed.

14.3 Translation is from variant in SS footnote.

15.1 This well-known poem, found with variants in all three collections, uses the weaving metaphor especially associated with the weaver Kabir. I have therefore included it, although the *Bījak* version is particularly obscure. Some of the lines are nearly impenetrable and probably corrupt. Where necessary I have simply made a best guess.

15.2 The old lady is generally taken to be Maya, going to get a new body woven for a *jīva* after it has left its last "home," i.e., died. The numbers in the poem are given various conventional interpretations having to do with the components of the body and mind.

15.3 According to the *Śabdasāgar*, *paisana* can be an old form of *paiṭhana*, to enter. Thus my interpretation: it fits into (enters) a two (and-a-half) kilo container.

15.4 *Tihāī* in modern Hindi means one-third, but this does not make sense in the context. The *Śabdasāgar* gives *tihāv* as a regional variant of *tihāī*. *Tihāv* denotes anger, quarrelling, nagging.

23.1 *Harafa*: an Urdu word usually meaning letter; *harafa revadi* is a kind of fruit, and all the glosses take *harafa* to mean fruit or sprout. It is proverbial that the sandal is so fragrant, the clove so aromatic, the sugarcane so sweet, that they should have wonderful flowers and fruit; but they have none.

23.2 Meru, Sumeru. Both names refer to the same legendary mountain, the *axis mundi*, and in yogic physiology, the spinal column. On "three worlds," see Glossary.

23.3 The fourteen worlds comprise seven heavens and seven underworlds, the latter ruled by *nāga*s or snake-beings.

23.4 *Chājanā*: to be fitting, becoming.

24.1 Sky-mouths: the chakras, psychic centers in yogic physiology.

24.2 The half-line in the *Bījak*—*pau binu patra karaha binu tumbā*—is stubbornly obscure and seems inappropriate in context. Commentators have tried to make sense of it. The same poem in nearly identical form is found in *Pañcvāṇī*, the only significant difference being in this line, which reads *paira bina nirati karā bina bājai*—"dancing without feet, playing [instrument] without hands." The latter reading has been used for the translation.

24.3 See Appendix A, Part 2, for an analysis of this poem.

28.1 Commentaries on this poem tend to be long. All the numbers have meanings: nine doors and seventy-two chambers in the body, four Vedas, six branches of philosophy, eighteen Puranas, and so on, with minor disagreements. "Locking the adamant doors" refers to yogic practices. As for the cow herself: some say she is Maya, some say mind (*mana*), some point out that Maya and mind are one (cf. sā. 105). VD and Rewa say she is speech (*bānī*). The poet banters with us: Did you figure out the cow?

28.2 *Baran* means both color and caste. So the line can mean that the cow is neither colored nor colorless, or that she is neither with nor without caste.

28.3 A pun in the closing: *gāya* means cow; it is also a conjunctive participle of *gānā*, to sing. *Pada* is song or poem. So the line *jo yaha pada ko gāya vicāre* means

both, "whoever sings this song and figures it out," and, "whoever figures out the cow in this poem."

30.1 In *The Great Integrators* (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1964), V. Raghavan writes of how the ancient monistic doctrine of the Upanishads and Vedanta was passed, complete with metaphors, to the medieval *bhakti* poets: "The legacy of this precious [Vedantic] belief was transmitted to the languages and the saints who . . . verified it in their experiences and confirmed it in their songs, sometimes using the same analogies of . . . the one gold and various ornaments, the one clay and many forms, the one ocean into which flow all rivers" (p. 78).

See, for example, Chhandogya Upanishad, 6.1: "Just as by knowing a lump of clay, my son, all that is clay can be known, since any differences are only words and the reality is clay; Just as by knowing a piece of gold all that is gold can be known, since any differences are only words and the reality is gold. . . ." Juan Mascaró, trans., *The Upanishads* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 117.

31.1 This poem is in *ulaṭbāṃsī* or upside-down language, discussed in Appendix A. On "swan," see Glossary.

31.2 SS has *bindā*, other eds. have *bindhā*, meaning to get stuck or entangled. The line could also mean that mud is stuck to the foot.

31.3 Could also be translated, "If a man can't see where he's going, . . ."

32.1 *Ghara ke khasama*: lord of the house. The text adds *rājā*, king; the idea is of a feudal overlord.

32.2 On Kaliyug, see ś. 11, n. 2.

32.3 *Tehi phande paru āpa bicāra*. The last word has been taken as *becāra*, "poor thing," rather than *vicāra*, "idea." *Āpa* is taken as "self," here translated as "soul."

33.1 See ś. 34, n. 1.

34.1 Lit., "The man of God wanders in the state of a swan." This signifies a level of spiritual attainment which confers discrimination (*viveka*), symbolized by the swan's proverbial ability to separate milk from water. The swan migrates to Lake Mansarovar in the Himalayas for the rainy season, and eats pearls. Mansarovar is the name of an actual lake on sacred Mount Kailash in Tibet. Symbolically it is the lake of consciousness, *mānas* meaning mind-heart-spirit.

34.2 Wordplay in *muktahala*, an old spelling of *muktaphala*. It means pearl; but its two components, *mukta* and *phala*, mean fruit of liberation.

36.1 In śs. 36 and 37 I have translated *ṭhaga* (cognate with English "thug") as con man, cheat, trickster, thief; *ṭhaganā* as to con or conjure; and *ṭhagaurī* as trickery, cheating. No one of these English words is as flexible as *ṭhaga* and its variations.

36.2 *Mūla*, lit., "root," means capital or nest egg and also suggests *sañjīvani mūla*, the miraculous root that restores the dead to life.

39.1 The king of birds, Vishnu's vehicle, destroyer of snakes.

39.2 *Sandhi*: juncture. VD ends his commentary by citing another "fine *bhajan*," worth quoting here:

> You remember Ram and let the world fight.
> White paper, black ink—
> let them read and write.
> The elephant moves at his own speed—
> let the barking dogs bark.
> God, goddess, ghost, mother, stone—
> let the praying ones pray.
> Kabir says, brothers, listen—
> let them go to hell their own way.

40.1 Although "feet" seems strange here, a *sākhī* in Vaudeville's *Kabīr* seems to explain its use:

> By saying "Fire," one is not burnt,
> but by putting one's foot [in the fire]!
> If a man knows not the mystery [of Ram],
> what's the use of him saying "Ram"? (p. 289)

41.1 *Ghat*, with the conventional double meaning of body and clay pot, initiates the metaphor of pot and potter which is worked out in this poem in detail. The potter is considered untouchable in North India, and clay vessels are unclean, the cheap unbaked ones being thrown away after a single use. The body is commonly referred to as a pot—one whose clay, as the poet points out here, surrounds the eight lotuses or chakras, channels of spiritual energy. The vessels of line 10 (*bāsan*) have the obvious secondary meaning of passions (*bāsanā*); one finds the word printed both ways. The potter's wheel has been inferred from *pāṭ*, defined as a washerman's stone slab or a millstone, but basically meaning any level surface. The pots are cut off the wheel with a string or wire. SS points out that in the Bhojpuri area a term of abuse for potters is *garakaṭṭa*, "neck-cutter." For further discussion of this poem, see Introduction, pp. 16–18.

42.1 The four aims of life as defined by Hindu scripture.

42.2 *Jahā pada tahā samāī*. The variant in SS footnote has been used. Lit., "Wherever the *pada* is, there is the entry." The several meanings of *pada* enrich each other. It means place or position (implying supreme place or enlightenment); it means foot or base (implying God's foot, adored by the devotee); it means poem or song. The two main meanings here are, "Where you are is the entry," and, "The poem is the entry."

44.1 Cf. Shvetashvatara Upanishad, 5.10: "Not a female nor yet male is it; nor yet is this neuter . . ." (trans. Hume, p. 407). See also ś. 6, n. 1.

44.2 On Kaliyug, see n. 11.2.

47.1 Water is the central image in this poem, which, like ś. 41, attacks the delusion of untouchability. In the largest sense the water is the stream of life or world-ocean in which all are immersed. There are also references to an actual river, perhaps the Ganga at Varanasi where Kabir lived. Hindus drink Ganga water in the conviction that it is holy and incorruptible, despite the fact that many dead bodies are thrown into the river, sewage is dumped there, and it is generally seething with the materials of life and death. Cow milk is also considered holy and pure. Nowhere are these beliefs ascribed to more generally than in Varanasi, the ancient pilgrimage center and bastion of orthodox Hinduism. The "house of clay" near the beginning of the poem is the pandit's body. The clay near the end can refer either to the impure clay cup or to the bodies of so-called untouchables (see note to ś. 41).

52.1 This poem is an example of *ulaṭbāṃsī*, discussed in Appendix A.

52.2 *Chāncharī*, translated as "fish," is a problem. All Kabir Panth commentaries and individuals I spoke to interpreted it as fish but could offer no linguistic grounds for doing so. SS suggests it is not fish but buttermilk, Hindi *chānch*. It is proverbial that butter cannot be churned from water; so a paradox of buttermilk rising from the ocean might be intended. Dr. Yugeshwar of the Kashi Vidyapith Hindi Department informed me that *suṣkalī* was a Sanskrit word for fish. Prakrit *s* or *ṣ(k)* can become *ch*, and *l* and *r* are interchangeable, so a transformation from *suṣkalī* to *chucharī* is at least conceivable. I have stayed with the traditional interpretation. Ahmad Shah, for reasons unknown to me, translates the word as waterfowl.

54.1 The yellow paste is made of turmeric, traditionally associated with marriages. In some places it is rubbed on the bodies of bride and groom in the belief that it will make them glow with beauty.

54.2 See sā. 111 with note.

54.3 *Samadhī* refers to the relationship between the two fathers of a married couple. It doesn't actually relate to the children, so "father-in-law" is not quite right, but it seems most appropriate here. See also ś. 6, n. 2.

54.4 *Gaune*: second or final marriage that takes place some months (or longer) after the first ceremony and signals the departure of the bride for her husband's house. The Sanskrit root (*gamanā*) means going.

55.1 This is one of the poems analyzed in Appendix A, Part 2.

62.1 This is one of the poems analyzed in Appendix A, Part 2.

62.2 A Hindu woman shows her married state by putting red powder in the part of her hair. To burn her part means to make her a widow.

62.3 The bed of *sahaja*.

62.4 Here *nijakai* is taken to be related not to Sanskrit *nija*, "one's own," but to Urdu *nijakānā*, "to come near."

63.1 In his "Key for Understanding Mystical Literature," W. M. Callewaert notes of the *ketaki* flower: "The black bees are said not to sit on this flower because the intoxication of its fragrance kills them." *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 7 (1977), p. 325, n. 4.

65.1 A *karavā* is a spouted pot of metal or clay. One often sees bathers carrying such pots to the river and collecting water to sprinkle on holy images.

67.1 The original has only "if" plus three nouns: If seed form god. One can only guess whether and where to add a verb, how to relate the words syntactically, whether to capitalize "god."

67.2 The *Pañcvāṇī* variant has, "There are many Vedas but [only] one tree." With slight differences in spelling and word division, the *Bījak* line says lit., "The Vedas tell much/many [ways] to cross [the ocean of birth and death]."

69.1 In this metaphor of the body as a musical instrument, the equation of the mouth with the shaft or neck of the instrument can be confusing unless we assume that the shaft is the spinal column and the "mouths" are the eight sky-mouths referred to at the beginning, i.e., the chakras.

70.1 Though folk-song forms appear elsewhere in the *Bījak* under song headings, this is the only example in the *śabda* section. It has a strong singsong meter with both internal and end rhyme. The end rhymes have three or more syllables, and each line ends with *jī*, translated as "sir."

70.2 This apparently reflects a belief, whether true or not, that jackals will not eat human flesh.

70.3 Lit., "as if they had been sown in the fields."

70.4 Lit., "whatever you do in the interest of your tongue, / you'll get the same in return."

71.1 The *cātaka* bird symbolizes the yearning and faithfulness of the separated lover. The object of its love is the rainwater that falls during a period of less than two weeks in the year, the *nakṣatra* (an astrological time unit) called *svāti*, around August–September. All year the *cātaka* drinks nothing, but utters a mournful cry: *Piu*! *Piu*!—"Beloved! Beloved!" During *svāti* it drinks the precious drops. Cf. Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, p. 170, n. 55.

71.2 Some translate the conclusion as, "Kabir says, you [or they] don't know its secret," with "says" being understood. Nearly all the *śabda*s in the *Bījak* include "says" explicitly. The few that don't (29, 37, this one) have another verb directly next to "Kabir" which can be taken as the predicate. So I have taken *na jāne Kabīra* as "Kabir doesn't know."

72.1 Lit. "crooked," the thrice-repeated adjective suggests the mincing movements of a vain man.

72.2 "Fleet" translates *beḍo*, "boat." Most texts have *beḍho*, glossed as an enclosure. But Rewa interprets it as *beḍo*, a boat full of hell and smell, not fit to take the *jīva* across the ocean of existence; this interpretation is supported by the SS text. "Scent" goes well with the foppish image presented in the first line. Varanasi is known for its perfume.

73.1 Could also be translated: ". . . drunk with delusion, in the grip of death, you fall down the well" (*kāl* meaning both time and death).

73.2 People say that a parrot thinks itself safe as long as it clings to a branch. A hunter can easily catch it by breaking off the branch. Cf. ś. 76.

74.1 See ś. 36, n. 2.

74.2 The verb in the last sentence is, puzzlingly, in the feminine gender. No commentator explains this satisfactorily. I have translated as if it were masculine. Another possibility is that it is meant to agree with *bājī*, *pekhanī*—tricks, show—both feminine; but the meaning of the line is still unclear.

76.1 The man who makes his living with performing monkeys catches them by taking advantage of their greed. He puts food into a narrow-mouthed jar that has a string attached. The monkey's fist goes in, but, filled with food, won't come out. Unwilling to let go of the food, it is caught.

76.2 See ś. 73, n. 3.

77.1 *Rāmānanda rāma rasa māte*. Many readers take this to mean, "Ramananda was drunk on Ram's *rasa*," and the line is often cited as the only direct reference to Kabir's supposed guru. But *rāmānanda* can also mean simply the joy or bliss of Ram. Rewa gives the latter interpretation.

78.1 Lit., "According to your understanding, such is your state" (*gatī*).

83.1 See ś. 10, n. 2, on *halāl*.

83.2 *Hujare bhītara paiṭhi muvā*. "Entering the *hujare*, you die." *Hujare* is defined in the VD commentary and the Barabanki glossary as a small room attached to a mosque, for solitary prayer.

84.1 The Qazi is a Muslim official who preaches and presides over ceremonies.

84.2 The sacred thread is worn by male members of the three highest or "twice-born" castes. The ceremony investing the sacred thread usually takes place when a boy is between eight and twelve years old. Until this "second birth," he is like a Shudra (the fourth and lowest caste).

84.3 "By force" refers to efforts to convert Hindus forcibly to Islam. Berfore and during Kabir's time it was common for Muslim rulers to destroy shrines and massacre recalcitrant Hindus.

87.1 "Forest of desire" is an interpretation of *kandalā bana*. *Bana* means forest. There are several possible translations of *kandalā*. Some commentators say "cave" (*kandarā*). One says "root" (*kand*). One says "mud." The Rajasthani variant has *kandalī*, which may be equated with *kadalī*, a symbol of sensual abandonment. Kadali is the land of women where, according to a Nath legend, Minanath—who received the yogic teaching directly from Shiva and became Gorakhnath's guru—got caught in sensuality. Gorakhnath went and rescued his teacher (see S. B. Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, 3rd ed. [Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadyay, 1969], p. 201). The forest is also a conventional symbol for *saṃsāra*. The *Śabdasāgar* gives "deer" as another definition of *kadalī*.

87.2 "Hut" translates *kheḍa*, an enclosure prepared by hunters to capture animals which are driven into it. "Easily" translates *sahajai*, with or by *sahaja*. On *sahaja*, see ś. 4, n. 1.

87.3 *Hāṅknā*: a verb describing the action of hunters who chase animals into the *kheḍa*, usually making a great noise.

88.1 *Sāvaj*, a game animal.

88.2 Or, "The whole world is a beast"; or, "There's just one beast in all the world."

88.3 *Banaurā*: auspicious song sung at weddings. The beast that has no head, horn, etc., may be compared to the cow of ś. 28 and to the yogi who has no hand, foot, etc. (ś. 74). For further discussion of this poem, see Appendix A, Part 2.

89.1 The Hindi is *māyā*. I have stretched the meaning to "desire" for the rhyme.

90.1 Dattatreya, a famous sage in the Puranas, is in some sources considered one of the incarnations of Vishnu.

90.2 On Gorakh, see Glossary under "Gorakhnath."

90.3 Vasishtha is the preceptor of Ram in the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

90.4 "Pir" is the Muslim equivalent of guru.

92.1 On the meaning of *mana* (mind or heart) in this poem, see Appendix A, p. 158, paragraph beginning "The big/little juxtapositions . . . ."

92.2 The lists name famous deities and devotees, both historical and mythological.

92.3 Niranjan: a name for God meaning one who has no stain/spot/mark.

94.1 See ś. 92, n. 3.

94.2 Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.9 refers to ultimate truth as indivisible, pure, the light of lights.

95.1 This is one of the poems analyzed in Appendix A, Part 2.

97.1 Hindus abstain from grains on *ekādasī*, the eleventh day in each lunar fortnight, roughly twenty-four days a year. Muslims fast during daylight hours in the month of Ramadan.

97.2 Lit., "False is he who doesn't think."

97.3 See ś. 90, n. 4.

101.1 I have taken a liberty for the sake of a rhyme. The elephant actually fell in the ant's mouth.

102.1 The three upper castes—priestly, princely, and mercantile—known as the "twice-born" (as opposed to the menial Shudra and the untouchable outcaste).

103.1 This poem, dealing with the famous closing episode in Kabir's life, exists in several variants. Hindus believe that to die in Kashi (Varanasi) confers immediate liberation; many old people still go there to await death. Kabir lived in Kashi, but as a final act of iconoclasm (so the story goes) he went to die on the other side of the Ganga in Magahar, a town of Muslims and low-caste and outcaste Hindus, many of them doing unclean work. Death there was said to result in rebirth as a donkey. A Maithili pandit predicted that Kabir would die in Magahar.

103.2 Lit., "If you die in Magahar you won't find death," interpreted here to mean you won't die right. In one edition *magahara* is written *magahari*, which creates a pun. *Maga* means path. Thus the word carries a double meaning: Magahar, the wretched little town where no orthodox Hindu would be caught dead; and *magahari*, Hari's path, the way of God.

104.1 This poem has been translated as an address to the proud and crafty Nath yogi. Most commentators disagree, taking it as a poem of *vinaya* or contrition and supplication to the Lord (Nath), in which Kabir enumerates his sins. *Vinaya* poems are not uncommon in the western Kabir collections, but there are none in the *Bījak* unless one interprets this as *vinaya*. The aggressive tone and the types of sins listed suggest strongly that this poem is an attack, not a prayer. Rewa supports this interpretation.

104.2 Though white on the outside, the crane or heron is cunning and violent. It stands still as if in meditation, but is only waiting for its chance to grab a fish. *Bak dhyān* (crane's or heron's meditation) is proverbial for hypocritical meditation.

106.1 The bee and heron, night and day, are images of youth and age, black (hair) turning to white.

106.2 *Bālā jīva*: lit., "a young female soul."

106.3 *Pānī*, besides meaning water, signifies luster and beauty. See note to sā. 58.

106.4 The crow's cawing is auspicious: it means someone is coming. Women separated from loved ones chase crows to make them "talk." In a well-known passage in the *Rāmacaritamānas*, Kauśalya asks the crow to giver her good news of her children's return from exile, promising to give it milk and rice in a golden dish.

106.5 The evocative verb *sirānā* means to conclude or extinguish. Its components are *sir* and *ānā*, "to come [from the feet] to the head." It is used to describe the extinction of embers from a holy fire which are consigned to a river, and the immersion of idols after worship.

107.1 The bullock used for crushing oilseeds is a proverbially pitiful image. Blindered, dragging a stone in circles, moving in a painful counterclockwise direction, fit for no other work, it lives and dies in the yoke.

107.2 "Crumbs" translates *juṭhana*—partly eaten, polluted food.

107.3 According to some legends, the soul faces a hellish river after death; it can be guided across by a cow, which one seizes by the tail. Sometimes a cow is brought to a dying person, who touches the tail in order to gain safe passage. The dog, on the other hand, is an extremely impure animal.

108.1 The opening lines of this poem are also in the *Guru Granth* (*gauḍi* 15). Where the *Bījak* has *bahuri* ("again"), the *Granth* has *bāhari* ("outside"), changing the meaning to, "Now I'm a fish out of water." In the *Bījak* version we have the situation of one who has done his utmost to give himself to God, yet finds himself, literally or metaphorically, reborn into the world-ocean, the cycles of *saṃsāra*.

108.2 Giving up hope can be an important spiritual step, as expressed in these lines of Dadu: "First let a man cease from the indulgence of the body, which binds him to the world. Let him abandon all hope in the three worlds, and the Changeless One will surely reveal himself." W. G. Orr, *A Sixteenth Century Indian Mystic* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1947), pp. 33–34. Cf. *Bījak*, śs. 77 and 89, sās. 277 and 298.

111.1 Troublesome line. SS ed. may have a misprint, as it disagrees with the four texts I use for comparison, and they agree with each other. He has *tāso vaise mānā* while they have *tāso vesā bānā* (with spelling variations). Meaning of SS version is obscure. In the other versions, *vesā* and *bānā* both mean dress or costume. The meaning is still strange. Shah translates, "He who knows the primal teaching will attain this garb." Vaudeville, in the manuscript of *Kabīr*, vol. 2, comments, "not clear," on this line.

112.1 Most texts have *jo niruvārai so niravāna*: Whoever can settle it is liberated (achieves *nirvāṇa*). SS has *jo nirvārai so niradhāna*, in which the last word is taken as a form of *nirdhāran*, resolution or decision. Thus, "If someone solves it, that will be the solution," or "If someone settles it, it will be settled."

Ramainī

1.1 The first part of the poem is almost certainly not by Kabir. Kabir Panth editions give many pages of commentary, as the lines seem to contain a poetic version of the sect's theory of cosmogony. Aside from a few *ramainī*s in the *Bījak*, there is nothing like this in any of the major Kabir collections. From "No one reads Vedas . . . ," the poem is more typical of Kabir. The passage, "On that day . . . they call you a man," is found in the *Pañcvāṇī*, r. 7.1.

1.2 The seven heavens and seven underworlds.

1.3 The three worlds.

1.4 Lit., "You and I had one blood and one life-breath [and were] enveloped by craving."

1.5 There are several variants and different explanations of the phrase I translate as "from here to there," based on SS text. For another view, see Jaydev Singh and Vasudev Singh, *Kabīr Vaṅgmay*, vol. 1 (Varanasi: Vishvavidyalaya Prakashan, 1974). "Your life" renders *vyavahāra*, worldly life, daily behavior.

1.6 There are two words for "world" in the original: *bhava* (existence, commonly seen as *bhavasāgar*, world-ocean or ocean-of-existence) and *saṃsāra* (world of birth-and-death). The same half-line concludes r. 74.

6.1 The original does not specify "his"; the possessive pronoun is masculine, feminine, or neuter, depending on the noun following it.

19.1 *Hātha chodi behātha bhayaū*, lit., "Dropping hands they become handless." The meaning is obscure. Shah and Vaudeville interpret: They let go of the guiding hand (of the guru) and become guideless. Jaydev Singh interprets: They have lost the invaluable thing that was in their own hand. VD says, become powerless.

20.1 *Viṣa*: poison, or sensuality (*viṣaya*).

20.2 The buzzing of the black bee (*bhṛngī*), symbolizing the guru, attracts the insect, which becomes so entranced that it is eventually transformed into a *bhṛngī*.

21.1 Originally a name for God, Niranjan (without spot/stain) through sectarian mythology came to be associated with *kāl* or Death. See Dvivedi, chap. 5, "*Niranjan kaun hai*?" The use of Niranjan for Death in rs. 21 and 22 suggests that they may be sectarian interpolations.

23.1 *Alpa sukha dukha ādiu anta*. Jaydev Singh cites Chhandogya Upanishad 7.23.7—"Joy (*sukha*) is in the All (*bhuma*). Joy is not in the small (*alpa*)"—and *Bhagavad Gītā* 5.22:

> For the enjoyments that spring from [outside] contacts
> Are nothing but sources of misery.
> They have beginning and end, son of Kunti;
> The wise man takes no delight in them.
> Franklin Edgerton, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944; reprint 1974), p. 30.

Sukha and *dukha* have been mistakenly transposed in the SS ed.

23.2 A puzzling line in the original giving rise to various guesses.

26.1 There is much confusion among the texts over the last two words in this line. The translation shows the general meaning.

26.2 In Hindu tradition the belly is conceived of as a firepit. Digestion is burning of food, providing warmth for the body. The embryo is "cooked" in the womb's fire for "ten months," head downward (note taken from manuscript of Vaudeville's *Kabīr*, vol. 2, *pada* 35). Cf. śs. 89 and 73.

26.3 I.e., designated them male or female.

26.4 It is proverbial that milk is the same color no matter what color the cow is. This usually means that inner quality has nothing to do with caste.

26.5 *Sutaradhāra*: director or stage manager in Sanskrit drama; puppeteer; artist. Jaydev Singh points out a pun linking this artist to the potter. *Sutradhār* literally means holder of the thread. The potter is also a threadholder, using the thread to cut each vessel off the turning wheel.

27.1 The lingam or phallus is the symbol of Shiva. SS suggests that the first part of the poem is a burlesque of Hindu views of creation, with Kabir's voice answering these views at the end.

27.2 The lady is the primal feminine, *prakṛti* or material nature. In *Bhagavad Gītā* 7.4 Krishna says that his *prakṛti* is eightfold, consisting of earth, water, fire, air,

ether, mind, intellect, and ego. In other contexts the lady may be called Maya or Devi (goddess); two lines later she becomes Parvati. Parvati is her second name not only because the goddess is another version of *prakṛti*, but also because Parvati was married to Shiva in two births: first as Sati and second as Parvati. The first marriage ended tragically. Born again as the daughter of the Himalaya, Parvati performed incredible austerities to regain Shiva as her husband. This time the union remained firm.

28.1 Indian looms are set in dug-out places in the ground. In tantric symbolism the earth is the lowest chakra (*mūlādhāra*) and sky the highest (*sahasrāra*).

28.2 The *nāri* (*nalī*/*narī*, "tube") is a small spool which is inserted in the shuttle; it has a hollow center through which the thread is drawn out. The two *nāḍī* (channels) on either side of the spine in tantric physiology are often called sun and moon.

35.1 *Gāyatrī* is often called the most important mantra in the Vedas; Brahmins have a sacred duty to recite it morning and evening.

35.2 *Chīncā*/*chīntā*: splashing or sprinkling, the ritual bath that purifies a high-caste person polluted by contact with a Shudra or untouchable.

35.3 *Pada nirvāṇa*: the place of *nirvāṇa* or extinction; the *nirvāṇa* song.

37.1 The meaning of the seven clevernesses is unclear. The importance of the *ramainī* lies in that it includes the only mention of the word *bījak*. A *bījak* is an invoice, or a guide telling the contents and location of hidden wealth.

45.1 Three images of animals snapping up deadly food. The fish's worm is on a hook. The mouse eats lizards, but the chameleon is poisonous. The snake eats rodents, but the noxious mole bears a double curse: the snake who eats him dies; the snake who seizes and then drops him goes blind.

45.2 Lit., "Everyone's life-breath goes."

49.1 On Qazi, see ś. 84, n. 1.

78.1 *Berī*/*beḍī* could be shackle as well as enemy.

Sākhī

5.1 On the Word, see Glossary.

19.1 *Kāl*: Death or Time.

21.1 The first line could also mean, "Half a couplet [*sākhī*] is on your head. / If you can work it out. . . ."

22.1 *Jīva* has sometimes been translated creature, sometimes being or living being. Its root meaning is life. The question here of "which is bigger" is similar to the series of questions in ś. 112, discussed in the Introduction, p. 23. Recognition of the "word" is the key to understanding the nature of the *jīva* or living being, as suggested in the last lines of r. 37.

34.1 Rock salt signifies what is crudest and cheapest, camphor what is finest and most costly.

40.1 The *cakora* bird, symbol of devotion, is in love with the moon. It eats hot coals, taking the fiery fragments for pieces of the moon.

42.1 Gorakhnath, the founder of hatha yoga (see also Glossary). It was a popular belief that the practice of yoga could lead to physical immortality.

43.1 Yogis and other holy men are usually not cremated but are thrown into a river. It is believed that their bodies are resistant to decay.

49.1 *Malayāgiri*: legendary southern mountain full of sandalwood trees, whose fragrance can enter ordinary trees and turn them to sandalwood. But the bamboo (which often grows near sandalwood) resists this transformation. On the bamboo and its hollowness (foolishness), see also sā. 321.

49.2 *Ḍhāk-palās*: two names for a common tree, *Butea frondosa*, called flame-of-the-forest.

52.1 The original says half a *kos*. A *kos* is two miles.

58.1 *Pānip*, from *pānī*, water, means luster, brilliance, radiance, and, by extension, honor and beauty. The term comes from the blacksmith's shop: when a blade is forged, the hot iron is suddenly plunged into cold water to make it brilliant and strong. This quality is *pānip*. Cf. ś. 106, n. 3.

62.1 *Pada*, with the double meaning of poem or song, and place or highest place.

62.2 Lit., you are "rich in umbrellas." Refers to the umbrella held over the heads of kings. Shah translates, "Whoever has perceived this word, he is a king of kings."

82.1 *Pārakhī*: one who tests or examines, who recognizes quality, knows true from false; thus the guru or discriminating faculty (*vivek*).

83.1 Lit., "He'll strike you."

92.1 I relate the *bak* or *bagu* of the text not to *bagula*, heron, but to *bagūla*, whirlwind. In the original the words for whirlpool and whirlwind are both connected to the word *jāl*, net or snare.

97.1 Refers to the professional snakebite curer, who tries to charm the poison out by reciting mantras.

99.1 Sadhu: popularly, a religious renunciant or wandering ascetic; literally, one who does *sādhanā*, spiritual practice.

103.1 Wordplay between *kālā*, black and *kāla*, Death.

106.1 *Beḍā*: a barrier of plants that keeps animals out but that also leaches nourishment needed by the crops.

111.1 *Caukā*: an area on the ground for religious ritual, marked out by designs in rice powder.

117.1 The first line refers to the *pulandar* (Indra, king of gods) of *sākhīs*. The "two letters" are *rā* and *ma*, or Ram. This great mantra fell, its power was lost, over four ages. *Rambhan* in the third line is problematic. I have related it to *rambha*, a loud noise, and *rambhanā*, a verb for the noise made by a cow.

122.1 *Kahai dui cāra*: lit., "They say two-four," like the modern Hindi idiom *do cāra sunānā* which means to abuse.

132.1 *Paricita parakhanahāra*. Lacking verbs and postpositions, the words could mean either "who is acquainted with the tester," or "who is acquainted [knows] and tests."

145.1 *Mantra, yantra*.

146.1 *Ankus*, the hooked iron goad held by the driver who sits on the elephant's head. *Ankuś rakhnā*, to hold the goad, is an idiom meaning to exercise control.

151.1 Several variants exist on this word. SS has *hitta*, benefactor. Other versions say, "With holy men you're a thief, with thieves you're straight."

155.1 *Athāiyā*: place where village council sits.

160.1 *Sikalīgar*: sharpener and cleaner of knives and swords.

161.1 Lit., "falls from your pocket, or the knotted corner of your garment."

163.1 Two trees are mentioned: *semura* or cottonwool and *chiula*, also called *ḍhāk* or *palās* (cf. sā. 49), sometimes known as the parrot tree. *Flowering Trees and Shrubs of India* (Bombay: Thacker & Co., 1970).

163.2 The parrot "adorns" his beak with the cotton of the cottonwool pod, which he mistakes for edible fruit—a common image for delusion, as seen in the next two *sākhīs*. There is wordplay in the verb *dhunanā*, which means to card or comb cotton, while the idiom *sir dhunanā* means to beat the head with the palms, to lament.

163.3 I have related *bhae* to the verb *bhānā*, to please or be pleased. If it were taken to mean brother, the line would mean that one tree is the other's brother, i.e., the parrot flies from the frying pan to the fire.

164.1 On "eyes of the heart," see sā. 178 and note.

165.1 See sā. 163, n. 2.

170.1 "Natural" translates *sahaja*. The knot is the knotted end of a garment that serves as a coin purse. The line can also mean, tie it naturally or easily in its knot.

178.1 The two pairs are the outer and inner eyes, those of the head and the heart.

187.1 Prof. Hazariprasad Dvivedi once told me, referring to this well-known *sākhī*, that although the English term "well-read" has been translated into Hindi, the traditional term is *bahuśruti*, well-heard. Kabir did not read or write, said Prof. Dvivedi, but he learned by oral tradition the contents of the Upanishads and other traditional literature.

192.1 The same *sākhī* concludes r. 11.

193.1 *Sir* (head) can also be read as *sar* (arrow), and *bhāl* (forehead, skull) as *bhālā* (spear, point). Then the line would tell of being killed by a non-arrow with a useless point.

194.1 Some scholars have taken this as a literal indication of Kabir's language, *Pūrbī* (eastern) being the general name for the eastern dialects of Hindi (Avadhi and Bhojpuri). Others point out that the directions have symbolic meanings. North is the abode of Yama or Death; west is heaven; south is hell. Some say the east represents mystery, the land of secret knowledge or yogic perfection (cf. Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, pp. 63–64; Chaturvedi, *Kabīr sāhitya kī parakh*, pp. 209–10).

197.1 Lit., "You gathered nine *man*" (one *man* equals 40 kilos).

204.1 *Akṣara*, letter or syllable, literally means indestructible.

206.1 "Tomorrow" (*kala*) also evokes the word for time or death (*kāla*).

207.1 *Upādha*, *upādhi* (modern *utpāt* or *upadrav*): mischief, riot, nuisance, disturbance.

209.1 *Kauḍī*: cowrie, a shell used as a coin of almost no value.

212.1 Hindus believe that association with death, even if accidental, carries karmic responsibility from which one may be released by rituals. For example, if your cow dies of old age or snakebite, you may have to go begging and carrying the rope the cow was tied with, then with the proceeds of the begging buy materials for ceremonies and offerings. Lighting the funeral pyre of a relative is considered a kind of murder. There are usually about two weeks of untouchability, during which one is purified by doing rituals and listening to recitation of scripture, especially the Garuda Purana.

213.1 *Kāna*, *kāni*, glossed in Barabanki as *badala* or revenge, retaliation, exchange. SS says that in the Bhojpuri region the verb *kānanā* means to be alert to your opportunity, ready to attack or take revenge.

216.1 *Halahala*: the poison extracted in the churning of the ocean and drunk by Shiva; any very deadly poison; a plant said to be so deadly that the smell of it kills.

217.1 According to Vaudeville the vine is the body; when "cut off" by yogic disciplines it flourishes; when "watered" with sensual pleasures it withers (*Kabīr*, p. 218, n. 4). The vine could also be the mind, and water the stream of uncontrolled thoughts.

224.1 *Siddha*: accomplished one, person with yogic powers.

229.1 The fishermen's court is the fish market. Kabir compares *siddha*s, or spiritual power seekers, to fish caught in a net they entered willfully. The dead fish have red eyes; red eyes are also said to be a sign of a *siddha*'s powers.

234.1 *Guna*: quality. "Rust" is inferred.

234.2 *Goṣṭa* or *goṣṭi*: dialogue, often religious discourse. "With the good" is inferred.

236.1 At the end of the *Mahābhārata* war, saddened by the slaughter and uninterested in ruling, the Pandava brothers set off for heaven. As they passed through the Himalayas, one by one they melted because of sins they had committed.

236.2 *Kāī*: algae, moss, scum; here rust. The implication is that Krishna is not the touchstone or perfect teacher, for if he had been, the Pandavas would have been liberated by their intimate contact with him.

247.1 *Sendhura/sindhaurā*: container for red powder that a married woman puts in her hair-parting; it usually has a large peaked cover.

251.1 Both Shaiva and Vaishnava devotees bathe stones (*patthar*): the *śivalinga* and the *sāligrāma*. Often they use a mixture of milk, curds, honey, Ganga water, etc., called nectar and drunk by devotees. *Kaṅkara/kaṅkaḍa* (gravel or pebbles) may refer to small stones placed around the linga. Manak gives *kaṅkaḍa-patthara* as a poetic idiom meaning dregs, rubbish.

252.1 Refers to the old custom of the wife's immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre, in poetry a symbol of faithfulness.

261.1 In this well-known *sākhī* I have used the universally found *patra* in the first line, rather than *bhāra* of the SS ed. The couplet is sometimes translated to mean that Kabir's words are as numerous as the leaves in the forest and the grains of the Ganga.

262.1 On swan and crane, see śs. 34 and 104 with notes, and sās. 256 and 17.

269.1 *Ṭaka*, coin worth 1/64 of a rupee.

270.1 Does *āratī*, the ritual of waving burning wicks in front of an image in the hope of getting a vision of the deity.

271.1 "Afraid" here is lit., "avoiding thought."

274.1 *Hīḍiyā*. Most texts gloss as *khojanā*, to search; Manak relates it to *hāḍanā*, to roam or wander, citing this line in Kabir.

283.1 The cage is the body; the bird of air is the breath of life.

293.1 Variant used.

296.1 VD glosses, "firm determination." Shah translates, "While the heart rests not on itself." Cf. sās. 29, 331.

302.1 *Marajīva/marajīya*: pearl-diver, a word whose components contain the stem of the verbs to die (*mar*) and to live (*jī*), playing on the concept of the living dead (*jivanmṛta*) or perfect yogi who has transcended the ego. (See Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, p. 257, n. 1.)

302.2 The text has *lāla*, red or ruby. But it is understood that this is conventional for jewel, in this case pearl.

338.1 Three types of *sādhaka*s or spiritual aspirants who, the poet implies, practice their disciplines for their own gain as ordinary people ply their trades—with the same results.

341.1 Playing on double meaning of *bigaḍna*: to be spoiled/ruined, and to be angry/lose temper/bawl out.

347.1 *Adhara*: (1) without basis; (2) space, sky.

348.1 "The three": three worlds (see Glossary).

353.1 *Sākhī*, the name of the verse form the poet is using, means eyewitness.

Appendix A, Part 1

1. The Kabir lines are from BI ś. 2. The lines from Lao-tzu are quoted by Juan Mascaró in the introduction to his translation of the *Dhammapada* (New York: Penguin, 1973), p. 24. The lines from Plato are cited by Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 5.
2. The buffalo and leeches are cited by Dasgupta, p. 423; the cannibalistic lady appears in BI ś. 62.
3. Letter to George and Tom Keats, 22 December 1817, in *Poems and Selected Letters* (New York: Bantam, 1962), p. 408.
4. Chaturvedi cites these examples (*Kabīr sāhitya*, pp. 156–67):

   "This ox has four horns, three feet, two heads and seven hands, and, tied up in three ways, makes a loud noise."

   "Man, this body surely merits your attention: rivers flow through it while the water stands still."

   "Hey scholar, whoever knows the form within this beautiful, dynamic bird should explain it. Milk flows from its head and it drinks water through its feet."

   "One standing still moves ahead of the runners."

   "Without hands or feet he grasps and moves swiftly, without eyes sees, without ears hears."

   The first three passages are from the Rigveda, the fourth from the Atharvaveda, the fifth from the Shvetashvatara Upanishad.
5. There are countless works that attempt to introduce and explain tantrism. For a simple and brief example, see the opening of chap. 6, "Yoga and Tantrism," in Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, pp. 200–07.
6. Per Kvaerne, *An Anthology of Buddhist Tantric Songs*, pp. 5–7.
7. There has been much discussion of the term *sandhābhāṣā* or *sandhyābhāṣā*. Kvaerne provides a useful condensation of the range of opinions:

   "Four interpretations of this term have been offered:

   "A: '*Twilight Speech*.'—this was suggested by Sāstrī in *Bauddh Gān o Dohā* (p. 8): 'Saṇḍyābhāṣā is a language of light and darkness, partly light, partly darkness; some passages can be understood, others cannot.' B. Bhattacharya has another curious explanation: 'They wrote in a language which was designated to them as the Sandhyābhāṣā, or the twilight language, meaning thereby that the contents may be explained either by the light of day or by the darkness of night.' Recently A. Wayman has defended the translation 'twilight language', i.e. language expressed in an ambiguous and unclear manner.

   "B. '*Intentional Speech*.'—On the basis of a wide material from older Buddhist sources as well as the Tibetan and Chinese translations of the term, Vidhusekhar Bhattacharya emended the term to *sandhā* and suggested that it should be understood as 'intentional speech'. This term has been accepted by numerous scholars, including P. C. Bagchi and M. Eliade. However, as S. B. Dasgupta has pointed out, one cannot disregard the fact that the Buddhist tantras consistently spell the term *sandhyā*.

"C. '*Enigmatic Speech*.'—This translation was adopted by E. Burnouf as early as 1852 in his translation of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*. More recently this rendering of the term has been made use of, for example, by S. B. Dasgupta.

"D. '*Secret Speech*.'—This is, obviously, not quite the same as 'enigmatic speech.' We find this translation used by Max Müller ('hidden saying'), and later by many other scholars, recently D. L. Snellgrove in connection with the Hevajratantra" (pp. 37–38).

Kvaerne's footnotes have been omitted here. In this Appendix, *sandhābhāṣā* and *ulaṭbāṃsī* are used interchangeably as referring to the same general tradition. *Ulaṭbāṃsī*, however, usually applies only to medieval *sant* poetry, primarily the works of Kabir, and to poetry associated with the Nath yogis.

8. See BI sā. 35.
9. There are several types of glossaries in Varma's *Sant Kabīr* and in *Kabīr sāheb kā bījak*, ed. H. Shastri and M. Prasad. See also P. Chaturvedi and Mahendra, eds., *Kabīr koś*; W. M. Callewaert, "Key for Understanding Mystical Literature," *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 7 (1977): 309–30, and "Key for Understanding Mystical Terminology," *OLP* 5 (1974); Dvivedi, *Kabīr*, pp. 93–106; Chaturvedi, *Kabīr sāhitya*, pp. 154–81; Eliade, *Yoga*, pp. 249–54; Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, pp. 413–24; Barthwal, *Nirgun School*, pp. 270–72; and A. Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1975), pp. 164–85.
10. Eliade, pp. 250–51.
11. Kvaerne, p. 39.
12. Ibid., p. 42.
13. Ibid., p. 60.
14. Ibid., p. 63.
15. Ibid.
16. Kvaerne identifies *caryā pada*s in which "ocean" is interpreted as "Clear Light" and "*saṃsāra*" (table, p. 44). In BI sā. 107 it seems to be the mind. The oceanic river of BI ś. 47 seems to be inside the body.
17. Zenkei Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*, trans. Sumiko Kudo (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 9.
18. Herbert V. Guenther, trans., *The Royal Song of Saraha* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), p. 5.
19. Eliade, pp. 200–01 and note VI, 1, pp. 399–403.
20. On the "laws of nature," see BI ś. 23.
21. See BI ś. 69.
22. D. L. Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*, Part I (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 14.
23. Ibid., p. 99.
24. Ibid., p. 100.
25. Ibid., pp. 101–03.
26. Ibid., p. 97.
27. Ibid., p. 93.
28. For example, the lowest center is described as a four-petalled lotus with a golden letter on each petal, at the center of which is a yellow square surrounded by eight shining spears whose tips are shaped like women's breasts. Within the square is a fiery triangle resting on its apex, representing the *yonī* (female organ), which contains a brilliantly haloed *linga* (male organ), around which is coiled eight times the *kundalinī* shining like lightning, with her mouth on the opening of the *linga*. She drinks nectar, produces sounds, and is to be meditated on as a sixteen-year-old girl in full bloom. On the triangle is the chakra's *bīja*-mantra, *lang*,

which rests on the elephant of Indra. In the *bindu* (dot) over the letter is a four-headed, four-armed Brahma shining like a million suns, seated on a swan; at his side a fierce Shakti who eats human flesh (especially children's livers) has a different emblem in each of her four hands, is plump, wears a black antelope skin, and sits on a lotus. Briggs, *Gorakhnāth* (Calcutta: Motilal Banarsidass, 1938; reprint ed. Delhi, 1973), p. 312.

29. See Briggs, p. 308, or Eliade, p. 240, for other names.
30. Cf. Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, *Studies in the Tantras* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1939), pp. 68 ff.; Eliade, p. 240; and BI ś. 38.
31. BI sā. 326; ś. 74.
32. See, for example, BI śs. 2 and 87.
33. Bagchi, pp. 68–72; BI ś. 111, ending "both together one!"
34. Briggs, p. 250.
35. Ibid., pp. 284–304.
36. Dasgupta, pp. 231–32.
37. Cited by Chaturvedi, *Kabīr sāhitya*, p. 159.
38. In 1978 Dr. Edward Henry (Department of Anthropology, California State University at San Diego) did a study in villages near Varanasi of *jogīs* and the *nirguṇ bhajans* they typically sing. The *jogīs* comprise a kind of Muslim caste of householders with both Hindu and Muslim characteristics. Their *nirguṇ bhajans*, often attributed to Kabir, include *ulaṭbāṃsī* and songs about death. Dr. Henry kindly shared with me a draft article on his research.
39. Pp. 419–24.
40. Songs recorded December 7, 1978, in Chittupur (on *ṭeka*, see Appendix B):

(1)
A rare one understands the *nirvāṇa* song. [*ṭeka* or refrain]
Earth rains, sky gets wet,
the gourd sinks, the stone rises,
the fish flies up and eats the crane,
the fire is above the frypan,
the bread eats the cook.
Kabir says, listen brother sadhu,
whoever gets the meaning of this song
is a sage, a knower, a great being.

(As introduction to the song, the men sang BI sā. 217.)

(2)
Folks, brothers, when did you see such a thing? [*ṭeka*]
The river sinks in the midst of the boat.
From an ant's piss flowed a river
where the pandit washed his *dhotī*.
The boatman threw out the great net.
When the ant went to her father-in-law's
she wore 360 kilos of eye shadow.
A camel killed an elephant by holding him tight. [?]
An ant died, 900 vultures stuffed themselves.
A cow milked a monkey—there was no lack of milk.
The butter was sold in Banāras.
A fire broke out in the well,
the mud burned up,
the fish got away untouched.
Shout Ram! Ram!
The man without dharma
goes to Death City—

Ravidas tells the truth.
Kabir says, listen brother sadhu,
this is the *nirvāṇa* song (*pada*).
Whoever gets the meaning of this song
is a sage, a knower, a great being.

(The singers have mixed up the signature lines of Ravidas and Kabir.)

41. For more details on Dvivedi's argument, see my "Studies in Kabīr," pp. 122–25.
42. "Saraha's Treasury of Songs," trans. D. L. Snellgrove in *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, ed. Edward Conze (New York: Harper & Row, reprint ed. 1964), pp. 224 ff. The various objects of attack mentioned here all appear in the first fifteen *dohās*.
43. Ibid., *dohā* 21, p. 227.
44. BI sā. 63. See also sās. 66, 74, 184, 224.
45. *Caryā pada* 43.1, Kvaerne, p. 241; "Saraha's Treasury" *dohā* 32 in Conze, *Buddhist Texts*, p. 228; BI ś. 103.
46. One way in which the Buddhist poets are *not* like Kabir is in their prominent use of erotic imagery and female figures to signify perfect wisdom. This aspect of tantrism is markedly absent in Kabir as in the other *sant*s, who tend to be suspicious of or downright hostile to women. In this regard Kabir is closer to the Naths than to the Buddhists.
47. *Caryā pada* 38, Kvaerne, pp. 222–23. Here, and in other songs quoted in this Appendix, I have slightly altered Kvaerne's translations to make them more readable. His very knowledgeable translations are interrupted by many parenthetical additions and comments.
48. Ibid., p. 131, *pada* 14.
49. Ibid., p. 136, *pada* 15.
50. Ibid., p. 119, *pada* 11.
51. Here the Sanskrit commentator says three of the relatives represent the breath, senses, and Maya; the fourth (the sister-in-law) he leaves uninterpreted. The interpretations seem to be based on puns. "Mother-in-law" is *sāsu* from Sanskrit *śvaśru*, similar to *śvāsa* (breath). *Māa* (mother) can also be *māyā*. *Nananda* (aunt) suggests *ānanda* (pleasure). Puns or sound affinities are a common jumping-off place for interpretations of *ulaṭbāṃsī*. But even if we don't know why certain equivalences are chosen, we can appreciate the general meaning of destroying relationships. Some of the above information is from Atindra Mojumder, *The Caryapadas* (Calcutta: Naya Prakosh, 1967), p. 44.
52. For example, śs. 3, 6, 44, 62. It is also interesting to note in passing the remarkable similarity between *caryā pada* 33 (Kvaerne, pp. 202–03) and BI ś. 95. The latter is discussed in Part 2 of this Appendix.
53. Kvaerne, pp. 162–63, *pada* 21.
54. Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondances," in *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1961), p. 13.
55. Kvaerne, p. 100, *pada* 7.
56. Ibid., p. 178, *pada* 27.
57. Ibid., p. 263, *pada* 50.
58. Ibid., p. 76, *pada* 2.
59. Ibid., p. 234, pada 41. Cf. *Diamond Sutra*:

As stars, a fault of vision, as a lamp,
A mock show, dew drops, or a bubble,
A dream, a lightning flash, or cloud,
So should one view what is conditioned.

Buddhist Wisdom Books, trans. Edward Conze (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 68 (Orig. pub. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958).

Part 2

1. In most cases, "upside-down" remains the most convenient translation.
2. The Great Mother (or Devi or Shakti) is the center of most tantric worship.
3. "It can be said emphatically that for knowledge of Kabir's principles, only the simple and straightforward *pada*s are helpful. It is essential to remember two points when trying to interpret Kabir's *ulaṭbāṃsī* and yogic metaphors: (1) classical tradition, and (2) Kabirdas's personal ideas." *Kabīr*, p. 104. Dr. Dvivedi, a great scholar and writer, and author of the best Hindi book on Kabir, passed away in 1980.
4. Thakur-sahab (as he is called) is a greatly respected scholar who was, with a younger coauthor, composing a series of commentaries on Kabir's works while I was in Varanasi. The commentaries have been published under the title *Kabīr vaṅgmay*.
5. R. 19. In addition to the poems analyzed here, the reader may be interested in looking at other poems in *ulaṭbāṃsī* style: for example, śs. 2, 6, 15, 23, 25, 28, 44, 52, 69, 87, 101, 111.
6. I will give more attention to the commentators in the early examples that follow, and will highlight my own ideas more in the later examples. In all cases where a commentator is not specifically cited, the idea may be presumed to be mine.
7. See n. 40 to Part 1 of this Appendix.
8. On crow, crane, and swan, see, for example, śs. 34 and 104, and sās. 17, 256, and 262.
9. We can go on enriching our store of associations using the tools mentioned earlier. The glossary in the Barabanki *Bījak* gives "spiritual" (marked *a.* for *adhyātmak*) meanings for animal symbols. For example, it says *mākhī* (fly) is Maya, citing a verse, "The fly doesn't settle on sandalwood." Although the *mākhī* who gets his head shaved in ś. 55 cannot be the female Maya, we at least know that flies are associated with delusion and are known to be repulsed by truth (the all-pervading fragrance of sandalwood). If we want to go still further, we can consult Kvaerne's chapter, "The Imagery of the Caryāgītī." There we will find interpretations of the elephant, cow, deer, frog, snake, and other animals, as they appear in the Buddhist songs.
10. First he said the "twelve" were the five sense organs plus the five breaths plus *mana* and *buddhi*. Then he said the "sixteen" were the first twelve plus *mana-buddhi-cetana-ahaṁkāra*. When I reminded him that *mana-buddhi* had been counted twice, he was undismayed, saying: "She came from her father's house, she's going to her in-laws'. What was in her father's house? Three *guṇas* and five sense organs. Add five breaths—oh, that's thirteen. All right, I've got it. Five plus three make eight, plus four *antaḥkaraṇ* (*mana-buddhi-cetana-ahaṁkāra*), that's twelve. She comes from her father's house, which is *nirguṇa*, to her husband's house, which is *saguṇa*. Five breaths, five sense organs, three *guṇas*, *mana*, *buddhi*, *ahaṁkāra*. We'll leave out *cetana* to make sixteen."
11. Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, p. 190. My translation is slightly different.
12. Cf. śs. 73 and 76.
13. Sās. 145, 146.
14. The closing lines of W. B. Yeats's "Among School Children" are strikingly similar to Kabir's lines in śs. 24 and 67:

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?
Selected Poems (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 117.

15. Ś. 42.
16. *Obscure Religious Cults*, p. 365.
17. Snellgrove, p. 107.
18. Sā. 22.
19. Jaydev Singh tells this story, citing the Raja of Rewa edition of the *Bījak* as the source. *Kabīr vaṅgmay*, vol. 1, p. 3.
20. See, for example, sas. 5, 29, 90, 209; śs. 36, 41, 97.
21. This understanding may clarify the meaning of the couplet concluding r. 37, which contains the only appearance of the word *bījak* in the *Bījak*. The Word reveals the *jīva* as the *bījak* reveals the treasure. On *bījak*, see Introduction, p. 27.
22. In the controversy over how to translate *sandh(y)ābhāṣā*, this interpretation lends support to the old "twilight language" or "borderline language" rather than to the more recently popular "intentional language." For a summary of views on this, see n. 7 to Appendix A, Part 1.

Appendix C

1. For details on how the versions vary, see SS, pp. 65–71.
2. Tivari, *Granthāvalī*, p. 91.
3. Ibid., p. 89.
4. See my "Studies in Kabīr," n. 51 to Chap. I, for a translation of Tivari's full account of Bhagavan-das, from *Granthāvalī*, pp. 97–99.
5. Tivari, *Granthāvalī*, p. 100.
6. The date on the manuscript is Vi.S. 1862, equivalent to A.D. 1805. SS, p. 25.
7. Ibid., p. 26.

Glossary

Brahma. The Hindu creator-god, one of the three major deities (with Vishnu and Shiva) in the Hindu pantheon.

Chakra. Lit., circle. According to yogic physiology, the series of energy centers located along a line from the base of the spine to the top of the head. Different systems posit four, six, seven, or eight chakras. Through yogic discipline the *kuṇḍalinī*-energy, coiled in the lowest chakra, can be made to rise through all the chakras. When it reaches the "thousand-petalled lotus" at the top, it releases full enlightenment. See also Appendix A, p. 141, including n. 28.

Gorakhnath. Master yogi and wonder-worker famous in northern and western India from medieval times. He founded the Nath Panth, a still powerful sect of ascetics who practice hatha yoga and are known as the *kānphaṭ* ("split ear") yogis because they pierce their ears and wear large earrings. Gorakhnath's life is shrouded in legend. Dates claimed for him range from before the creation of the world to the fourteenth century. George Weston Briggs, in *Gorakhnāth and the Kānphaṭa Yogīs*, finds the most convincing evidence pointing to two possible periods: the eleventh century or the seventh to eighth centuries.

On Gorakh's relevance to Kabir, Charlotte Vaudeville says:

> Some aspects of Tāntric Yoga, and particularly the teaching and practices of the Gorakhnāthī or Nāth Panthī Yogīs constitute an important element of Indian medieval culture, where they mostly appear integrated with some kind of Bhakti, either in its Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava form. The so-called *nirguṇī* Bhakti, whose chief exponent was Kabīr, appears to be so heavily indebted to the Nāth-panthī form of Yoga that Kabīr's sayings can hardly be understood without reference to it. Though Kabīr himself and the Sants after him generally did not adhere to Gorakhnāthī doctrines, and though Kabīr emphatically rejected their practices and mocked their vain pretension to have conquered death and to have obtained bodily immortality, the very terms in which he poses the equation of life, the ground on which he stands to judge the world around him, as well as a good part of the traditions that nourish his thought and provide him with a particular esoteric vocabulary, are largely those of Tāntric Yoga. . . . Though Kabīr also draws freely on other traditions and uses a variety of similes, the imagery and vocabulary peculiar to Tāntric Yoga provides him with a system of ready symbols which, however esoteric they may appear to the Western reader, were certainly charged with much prestige and a real power of suggestion for the mass of his listeners who themselves, largely through the preaching of the ubiquitous Nāth-panthī Yogīs, had drunk deep of that ancient tradition (*Kabīr*, pp. 120–21).

See also Appendix A, pp. 139–42.

Hari. Epithet of Vishnu (q.v.). Kabir sometimes uses it as a name for God.

Jīva. A living being, a creature, brought into existence when life (*jī*, the root "to live") enters a body.

Maya. Often translated as "illusion," *māyā* actually refers to the phenomenal universe, the ephemera of transient forms. As these forms are always changing, going in and out of existence, they are "illusion." But Maya is also power—the power of finiteness, definition, bringing into form; and Maya is desire, for the existence of forms (including our own bodies) arouses a hunger to possess and control those forms. Sometimes Maya is presented as a concept; more often in Kabir it is personified as a powerful female being who leads people into craving and confusion.

Nirguṇa. See n. 20 to Introduction.

Puranas. General name given to collections of Hindu myths in Sanskrit; for example, the *Bhāgavat Purāṇa* contains the stories of Krishna's life on earth and the principles of Krishna *bhakti*. *Purāṇa* means old.

Ram. In Hinduism, the name of the seventh avatar of Vishnu, King of Ayodhya, hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic. In Kabir, Ram sometimes seems to be a name for God, though it is not the anthropomorphic Hindu deity. More often it seems to be a practice, a mantra, the Name, which is to be repeated over and over again by the devotee. See also Introduction, p. 31, and Appendix A, pp. 159–60.

Śabda. See "Word."

Saguṇa. See n. 20 to Introduction.

Satguru. True guru. In Kabir it may mean God, one's inner guru, or a human teacher.

Shastra. A broad general name for Hindu books of learning, including scripture, law, logic, myth, ritual, and science.

Shiva. One of the three major Hindu deities (with Brahma and Vishnu), Shiva is the great yogi who practices austerities in the snows of Mount Kailash and is worshipped by members of the Nath sect and others who practice hatha yoga.

Shudra. Lowest of the four castes in the Hindu system. Shudras are often craftspeople and are not considered twice-born like the other three castes. Brahmins traditionally avoid contact with them, but they are still higher than the untouchables who do the most unclean work and are beneath the whole caste system.

Swan. Hindi and Sanskrit *haṃsa*, which may also be translated as "goose." Symbol of the liberated *jīva* (q.v.) The two syllables of *haṃsa* are said to be like the sound of the breath going in and out. When repeated over and over the sound becomes indistinguishable from the famous Upanishadic dictum *so ham*, "I am That," the realization that there is no difference between oneself and the supreme truth. See also ś. 34, n. 1.

Three Qualities. In Sanskrit, the three *guṇas* or properties of mind-and-matter, one of the primary categorizations, therefore a symbol of the countless distinctions that eventually conceal from us the one supreme truth. The three qualities—*tamas*, *rajas*, *sattva*—are associated, respectively, with (1) darkness, heaviness, inertia; (2) energy, passion; (3) purity, goodness. *Guṇa* originally means strand. Krishna speaks of the three *guṇas* in *Bhagavad Gītā*, 14.5–10.

Three Worlds. Heaven, earth, and the underworld; i.e., the whole universe.

Vishnu. One of the three major Hindu deities (with Brahma and Shiva), Vishnu is the god who incarnates himself out of compassion for living beings, to save the world from overwhelming evil and to give his devotees a form to worship. Usually ten avatars are spoken of, though some scriptures list twenty-four. While Kabir does not believe in avatars, he uses Vaishnava names for the supreme being (Ram, Hari, and in some collections Krishna).

Word. Kabir's simplest way of referring to ultimate truth or the means of experiencing it. The Word is the fundamental sound of the universe; it is called Ram, or the Name. See also "Ram" above.

Yama. The Hindu god of death.

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